MARVEL NOVEL SERIES #4

PUBLISHED IN CANADA

STAN LEE PRESENTS

CAPTAIN AMERICA®

IN A NOVEL BY JOSEPH SILVA

HOLOCAUST FOR HIRE

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THE RED SKULL!

His name inspires terror wherever it is heard, and sane men tremble in undisguised fear before his awesome, hideous presence!

There is nothing this despotic madman is incapable of creating, nothing he will hesitate to destroy!

And now he has set into motion the most monstrous scheme of his infamous career—and every tick of the clock brings our world that much closer to the brink of Thermonuclear Warfare!

Tick ... tick ... tick ... tick ... tick ... tick ... tick ...

CAPTAIN AMERICA

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A heart-pounding, thrill-a-minute manhunt, pitting the insane genius of the Red Skull against the patriotic power of

CAPTAIN AMERICA

Living Legend of World War Two!

AN INSTANT COLLECTOR'S ITEM: THE STAR-SPANGLED AVENGER IN A FULL-LENGTH NOVEL!

CAPTAIN AMERICA'S RED, WHITE AND BLUE SHIELD SIZZLED INTO HIS ENEMY'S MIDDLE . . .

Then Cap, after executing another impressive somersault, planted his red-booted foot against the man's chest.

The gunman exhaled loudly, let go of his automatic and toppled to one knee. Cap dealt him a choppy blow to the neck which laid him out cleanly atop another of his fallen associates.

Pivoting, Captain America picked up his shield in time to ward off the slug from the small .32 revolver Jupiter had produced.

Grinning, Cap charged the fat man.

He never reached him.

Jupiter had whirled around and jabbed at a button set in the wall. The floor opened, sending Cap plummeting down into the murky waters of the East River, towards the scow that housed Jupiter's headquarters.

This was no ordinary scow. The craft was powered by a mighty engine and its propellers had started to spin, thrashing away at the dark water.

The suction began tugging at Cap, pulling him away from the air he sought and toward the deadly chopping blades . . .

HOLOCAUST FOR HIRE

BY
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Packaged and edited by
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A KANGAROO BOOK
PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

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Another *Original* publication of POCKET BOOKS

POCKET BOOKS, a Simon & Schuster division of
GULF & WESTERN CORPORATION
1230 Avenue of the Americas,
New York, N.Y. 10020

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For information address Marvel Comics Group,

575 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022

ISBN: 0-671-82086-9

First Pocket Books printing May, 1979

Cover Art by Dave Cockrum.

P.V.S EBOOK

Printed in Canada

Dedicated to
The Ford Motor Company—
for making all this
necessary.

One

The walls came tumbling down.

Along with red tile roofs, plate-glass windows, wrought-iron balconies, bamboo shutters, great chunks of concrete, jagged beams of wood, twisted metal girders.

And people. Men, women, children. Falling, screaming, twisting through the bright morning, as building after building shook and shook and finally collapsed.

A scant ten minutes ago Kitambaa had been a proud new seaport city, capital of the emerging African nation of Jangwa. It had been clean, well-groomed, proud of its many towering office buildings, its banks, libraries, and university. Sparkling new cars traversed the wide, well-paved streets, along with efficient green buses and a multitude of bicycles. And the harbor itself was crowded with ships from all over the world.

The first sign of anything wrong had come from the harbor area. There, along the docks, the dozens of woebegone stray dogs who haunted the waterfront alleys, foraging for food, had suddenly started yowling. Some of them began

writhing in the dust on their scruffy backs. Something was bothering them, something only they could sense.

It wasn’t like any other earthquake. At the start, the ground didn’t tremble at all. The buildings just started to shake, very slightly at first, quivering and giving off an odd hum.

The quivering grew worse. Inside the high new offices in the heart of Kitambaa pictures began to jump off the walls, and framed diplomas crashed to the floor. File-cabinet drawers popped open, coffee machines leaped from their perches. Desks hopped, chairs rolled. The office people shouted, screamed, some warning their fellow workers not to panic.

Everything was shaking now. Windows snapped, sending sharp shards of glass flying down into the streets. The lampposts were swaying, the palm trees shivering. The ground itself caught the shakes and commenced vibrating, cracking. Zigzag rents opened in the handsome streets and went knifing along for blocks—cracks wide enough to swallow up cars and people.

The whole city was falling. Great hunks of masonry and steel broke free of the high buildings to come crashing down. Cars were smashed, and so were the helpless people in them. There was no wise course to follow. If you ran, you might fall into a gaping chasm, be hit by a runaway car or be struck by the raining debris. But if you stayed inside, your building would collapse on you. So people ran, hid—and were destroyed.

Square mile after square mile of the city was falling apart. The hard-won achievements of over five years of struggle and work were shaking and collapsing into nothing.

Fires started, as ruptured gas and fuel lines exploded. Torn power lines whipped and sizzled, broken water mains geysered.

The two special television cameras that had been, very quietly, planted the night before shook free of their positions and went crashing into the street, sending off their final roller-coaster views of the destruction of Kitambaa.

The black man in the spotless white uniform laughed, wiping at his perspiring face with a pale blue handkerchief. The gold braid with which he was richly adorned jiggled and clacked.

“Delightful, delightful,” he said as the pictures faded from the television monitors he’d been watching intently. “A most wonderful and complete devastation.” He laughed harder, causing the gold fringe decorating his wide shoulders to flap in time to the bouncing of his plump black body.

“Then our demonstration met with your approval, General Nguruwe?” asked the man who sat in a shadowy corner of the vast office. He was large and hairless. He wore a black suit and his right arm was made of metal.

The general struggled to bring his pleased laughter under control. “But of course, Baron Graff,” he replied, holding back a guffaw. “It was totally magnificent. As they say in your country, it was groovy.”

The baron’s monocle popped out from his eye. “My country remains . . . never mind, general.” He extended his gunmetal fingers. “If you will hand over the fee.”

“Certainly, certainly.” The general wiped again at his plump black face. “Ah, to see the vile city of theirs brought to dust was well worth the price. Kitambaa rightly belongs to us, to my country. Indeed, half of Jangwa consists of our ancient tribal lands, unjustly given to them because of United Nations’ stupidity in—”

“General, let me once again assure you I have no interest in your petty politics.” The baron stood. His metal arm accidentally brushed against a table lamp and sent it

smashing to the hardwood floor. He made no apology as he approached the African dictator with his metal hand outstretched. “Our fee, if you please.”

Swallowing, tucking his handkerchief away inside his uniform, General Nguruwe nodded. “It’s in the briefcase, baron.” He gestured at the leather case that sat smack in the center of his highly polished mahogany desk. “One hundred thousand dollars in cash. A very reasonable price for so satisfying a show.”

“We’re interested in testing our process a few times before we . . . before it is put to its ultimate use.” The metal fingers closed around the handle of the briefcase and the baron picked it up.

“You don’t wish to count it?”

“I’m certain it’s all here, general,” said the hairless baron. “For if it wasn’t, then your own lovely capital city would quite soon be rubble.”

The general attempted a not too successful chuckle. “Exactly how does your process work, how do you—?”

“I’m afraid that must remain our secret.” With the briefcase swinging slightly in his metal hand, Baron Graff headed for the door.

“Um . . .” began the plump general, rising out of his chair and waddling after his visitor. “I didn’t inquire about this before, baron, but . . . well, we have many enemies. Did you approach any of them and offer them a chance to destroy us?”

The baron’s face was, for an instant, touched with a faint smile. “Of course, general.”

The dictator gasped. “And why didn’t you—?”

“They couldn’t meet our price.” With a polite bow, the baron left the executive suite.

Two

Giacomo Macri was one of the happiest beings, at the moment, in all of this particular borough of New York. A thickset man in his middle thirties, Macri sat in the back room of Mama Francesca's restaurant holding five very desirable playing cards. The eight, nine, ten, Jack, and Queen. All of them hearts. Breathing carefully and evenly through his moderately flattened nose, he kept his face expressionless. There was $690 piled up in the center of the round green table, and Macri knew he was going to win it.

"Are you in or out?" Phil Sewlin was asking Butchy O'Kennon.

Butchy was a huge man with a very small head. His tiny sunburned face was creased with thought, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. "I'm considering."

"Look, Jack bet eighty bucks and I raised him and he saw me and raised me ten," Phil explained. "You want to stay you got to toss a century into the pot. Otherwise drop out like Lucky done."

“Geeze, I got good cards is the thing, Phil.”

“You ain’t supposed to tell us that, dummy,” said Lucky, who was nearly as large as Butchy, a fact emphasized by his too tight pinstripe suit. “And hold your cards up. Playing with you is like playing Old Maid with my kids.”

“How’s your oldest boy?” inquired Butchy. “I hear he got the flu or something. Is he going to be able to make his first communion or—?”

“Bet or fold!” urged Phil, his voice climbing.

Macri poked his tongue into his cheek, glancing first at the wall clock and then, very casually, at the cards in his hand. He was sure he had the others by the short hairs. What were the odds of anybody else having a straight flush? And if this jerk Butchy put in, the pot would grow to $790. *Some of these guys Jupiter is hiring lately,* Macri thought to himself, *are real meatballs. You’d think a guy smart as Jup—*

The back door burst off its hinges.

It was an absolutely stunning sight—the door flying across the smoky room, its hinges flapping free like little metal wings, coppery screws spinning every which way.

Butchy dropped his cards first. He pushed back from the table and yanked his .38 revolver out of his belt. Then he fired at the strange figure who came hurtling into the room in the wake of the defunct door.

The bullet bounced off the man’s shield.

“Shield?” Macri had never seen anything like this before. A big muscular guy decked out in some kind of trick suit that made him look sort of like the American flag. He had red boots, blue tights, and a blue chain-mail tunic that was decorated with red and white stripes and a big white star. He wore a blue cowl with little white wings at the temples, and red gloves. He was carrying a big round metal shield, with a white star smack in its center.

Phil thought about the cash first, scooping it off the table and stuffing it into the pockets of his suit before whipping his .45 automatic out of that fancy monogrammed shoulder holster of his.

Lucky yelled, “Holy smokes, it’s Captain America!” and then decided not to stick around for the fight. He jumped right over the card table, scattering cards and ashtrays, and dived for the other door.

But this red, white, and blue flash beat him to it, pulling him clear off the floor and tossing him backwards. Tossing him directly into Macri.

It took the wind clean out of him. Worse, the force of the jolt made him drop his cards. “Hell, the only straight flush I’ve had in six weeks!”

He made a charge at the star-spangled figure who’d burst in on them.

Bullets from both Phil’s and Lucky’s guns were sizzling through the air, but not one of them was hitting this Captain America guy. He either ducked or deflected the bullets with that red, white, and blue shield. He was faster and trickier than some guy in the circus.

Macri bobbed, weaved. He was going to get in a punch while this fancy Captain America was distracted by the gunfire. A couple of right jabs in the ribs ought to—

“Yow!”

The captain’s left fist slammed out, connected with Macri’s ample chin and sent him sprawling. He went bicycling back until his head bonged into the far wall.

“We can save a lot of trouble,” suggested Captain America, “if you fellows will simply tell me where I can find Jupiter.”

“Go to the planetarium,” snarled Phil. Holstering his gun, he picked up a chair and charged.

But Cap wasn’t where he was supposed to be.

Instead he was unexpectedly swinging from the overhead light fixture. This made him, briefly, into a deadly sort of pendulum. His crimson-booted feet connected with Butchy's chin.

"Unk!" Butchy bit his tongue, swayed, and passed out.

Landing catlike, Cap sent his shield spinning away from him. It flew swiftly, giving off an unsettling sort of hum, until it drove into Phil's midsection. That folded Phil up like a boarding house bed and stopped his plans to draw his gun again.

Macri, meanwhile, had eased his knife out of his leg holster. Narrowing his eyes, he flung it.

The blade struck Captain America in the back, square between the shoulder blades, and bounced off.

"Bounced off?" Macri, realizing that the Cap's chain mail had done him wrong, decided to head for a doorway.

That trouble was that this Captain America was everywhere. Somersaulting deftly over the tipped table, he was suddenly right in front of Macri.

"Listen," said Macri, uncomfortably aware that he was the only one still on his feet. "You must have made a mistake, all we got here is a perfectly legit little restaurant."

"The restaurant isn't bad," said the star-spangled figure. "In fact, the scampi is quite good. But this happens to be one of Jupiter's fronts, a part of his numbers operation."

"Numbers?" Macri blinked, not too successfully feigning innocence. "You know, it really makes me damn mad when people go around accusing anyone with a foreign-sounding name of being mixed up in—"

"Save it," advised Cap. "Tell me where I can find Jupiter. I want to talk to him fast. Otherwise I'm going to keep dropping in on the businesses I know he's got a fat finger in."

Macri had an insight. “Hey, you must be the guy what smashed up the horse parlor in Rego Park and cold-cocked six guys.”

“I am,” admitted Captain America with an intimidating grin.

“Hell, you really—”

The room’s other door, the one still on its hinges, swung suddenly open.

Captain America tensed, then relaxed.

A waiter had entered with a tray. A silver covered dish rested on top of it. “Mama thought you boys might like a little snack,” he announced.

“Huh?”

The waiter halted near Cap, lifted the lid of the dish and picked up the .38 revolver that lay on it. The revolver barrel was pressed to Cap’s head before he could make a move. “You want to see Jupiter?” the waiter asked. “You got it. C’mon.”

Two more men with guns were planted on the threshold.

Captain America had a satisfied expression on his bronzed face as he allowed himself to be escorted out of the room.

“I had a straight flush,” Macri said to nobody.

Three

His boss lay flat out on the expensive flooring.

Jake Sheridan circled him once, then sat down on a canvas chair that provided him with a view of a large stretch of smog-smeared Hollywood. “How many more, Lou?”

Panting, Lou Mixx replied, “Eleven more pushups. Then I have to do sit-ups.”

Jake was a middle-sized man of thirty-six, casually dressed in denims and a rugby shirt. He was tan and curly-haired. “I want you to send me to New Haven.”

Struggling with his exercises, the chunky managing editor of *Newsmag* inquired, “Why?”

“Ought you to be wheezing like that? Isn’t that Mother Nature’s way of warning you to knock it off?”

“Nobody said getting into shape was going to be easy. Why New Haven?”

“What sort of shape are you aiming for? It may take years to arrive at what you want,” remarked the reporter. “New Haven is the starting point for something big.”

“Explain,” puffed Mixx as he counted off the remaining push-ups.

“It’s about earthquakes. Probably you’ve—”

“No more quake mysteries, Jake. That piece you did two weeks ago, about the guy in Solvang who had the Lemurians telling him when the next big California quake was due, got me a lot of flap from back—”

“That was only a human-interest thing. Anyway, I’m not talking about local quakes.” Shifting in his chair, Jake fished a small notebook out of his hip pocket. He flipped it open to a middle page. “Yesterday it was Kitambaa, over in Africa. Whole darn place, a spanking new city wrought out of the jungle, is in ruins.”

“So? Acts of God are happening all the time. We’re giving the quake a couple paragraphs in our world roundup section.”

“It wasn’t really a quake.”

“Meaning?” asked his editor, hesitating at the topmost point of his penultimate push-up.

“Well, Lou, the events in Kitambaa bear a striking resemblance to those which occurred in Santa Pulga, Brazil, two weeks back.” Jake tapped the page in his notebook. “And a little over two weeks prior to that there was a similar thing happening in Norway.” The curly-haired reporter leaned forward. “None of these locales has any previous history as a quake area.”

“There are a hell of a lot of imponderables with quakes, Jake. One seismologist has one theory, some other guy another.” His push-ups finally completed, Mixx squatted on his thick carpet to catch his breath. “Nobody can explain quakes.”

“A fella name of Dr. Gregory Crandell can,” said Jake. “At least I’m betting he can explain this series of imitation quakes.”

“Who’s he?” Stretching out on his broad back, the managing editor commenced grunting through a series of sit-ups.

“Dr. Gregory Crandell was working in some very advanced areas of applied sonics.” Jake shut his notebook and returned it to his hip pocket. “The government was very interested in the experiments Crandell was conducting at the New Haven neosonics labs.”

“Why are you using the past tense? Did the old boy kick off?”

“He vanished,” replied Jake. “Five months ago. That’s before these so-called quakes started.”

“Crandell could make earthquakes?”

“He was working on some kind of huge sonic gun.” Jake rose and went to the window to watch the smog thicken in the afternoon outside. “A weapon capable of causing buildings to shake, rattle, and roll.”

“They can invent stuff like that, yet nobody comes up with a diet that really works,” said Mixx, straining to reach his expensively shod toes with his pudgy fingertips. “You think Crandell is behind this business?”

Jake shook his head. “He has a damn good reputation, he’s no madman. My guess is, somebody snatched the guy.”

Mixx remained in a sitting position, his sweating face thoughtful. “Make a terrific story, wouldn’t it? Mad scientist goes bonkers, topples entire cities. Conspiracy suspected, CIA cover-up. *Newsmag* gives you the exclusive facts.”

“So I can go to New Haven?”

“Go,” said the *Newsmag* managing editor. “And take Amanda along.”

Jake scowled. “Amanda Twain?”

“How many Amandas do I have on the staff?”

“Well, there’s one down in subscriptions and I think—”

“Amanda Twain. She’s a damn fine investigative reporter. Plus which, Jake, she has a knack for keeping you under control.”

“She hates me.”

“Which may well be the secret of her power over you.”

“Amanda Twain,” said Jake slowly and sadly. “Okay. It’s a hell of a price to pay, but I’ll do it.”

“Try not to annoy any more people than necessary. Our publisher’s still ticked off about what you did in Buenos Aires.”

Jake smiled a bleak smile. “Call you soon as we have something.” He edged toward the door.

“Any idea how many of these nitwit sit-ups I’ve done so far?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Damn. Six too many.”

Jake departed.

Four

The motor launch roared across the twilight waters of the East River.

Captain America sat in the stern as the foam splashed over him and the two guns pointed at his head. Despite his seemingly dire situation, Cap was inwardly pleased. He was being taken, at high speed, to the one man in the Manhattan area he wanted to see.

Up ahead in the dusk loomed a garbage scow. It was loaded with a highly pungent cargo, and gulls were wheeling through the failing daylight and making forays at the stuff.

The launch cut its speed, then killed its motor altogether and swung alongside the drab scow.

“End of the line, pretty boy,” announced the heavy with the .45. “No funny stuff, else you’ll end up decorating that mound of crap yonder.”

The star-spangled crusader leaped agilely from the bobbing launch to the deck of the scow. His armed escorts, less gracefully, followed him aboard.

“Use the red door,” ordered the one with the .38.

Cap obliged and made his way down a worn wooden stairway. There stood another door. After opening it, he found himself entering a lavishly furnished cabin.

There were three men standing in the surprisingly opulent room. A fourth, a huge fat man, was sitting on a thronelike carved chair in the center of a lush Oriental carpet.

Cap’s escorts remained outside, shutting him in with this new group. Each of the standing men held a gun.

The immense man in the chair was in his forties. He wore a expensive gray suit, and a zodiac medallion hung from his thick neck. Most of his fat stubby fingers were decorated with jeweled rings. “What’s your birth date?” was his first question.

Cap merely grinned at him. “I didn’t come here for small talk, Jupiter.”

“This isn’t small talk, my red, white, and blue friend,” wheezed fat Jupiter. “We’re all of us ruled by the stars and planets. I myself am a Capricorn, and I knew today was going to be a very fortunate day for me. Hence, I instructed certain of my minions to escort you here.”

“Saved me a lot of time.” Captain walked nearer to the enthroned fat man.

The standing men shifted, keeping their guns aimed at him.

Jupiter gave a wheezy chuckle. “Am I correct in assuming you’ve been anxious to chat with me?”

“That I have,” acknowledged Cap. His eyes narrowed slightly as he studied the enormous crook. “I’m looking for Dr. Gregory Crandell.”

Jupiter’s laugh was deeper and louder as he winked at his nearest henchman. “He’s going to need a doctor before we get through with him.”

The three associate hoodlums laughed.

Cap said, “You know Crandell isn’t an M.D., Jupiter.”

“Do I?”

“You’re involved in some way with his disappearance,” continued Captain America. “I want him.”

“Never heard of the man, I assure you.” Jupiter stroked his zodiac medallion with his squat fingers. “You’ve been causing a good deal of trouble for me, sir, laboring under this delusion that I had something to do with kidnapping the good doctor.”

“I see you know he was kidnapped,” said Cap.

“It pays me to keep up with a wide range of events,” said the fat man. “That does not in any way indicate that I’m directly involved.”

“You’re not in this alone,” Cap told him. “The kind of cheap rackets you indulge in have no use for a man of Dr. Crandell’s intellect. Since you’ve made no try for ransom either, it follows that you must have grabbed him to turn him over to others. You’re going to tell me who.”

Another rumbling laugh shook Jupiter’s immense frame. Grunting, he pushed himself off his throne. “You’re not very perceptive, sir. I am the one who gives the orders hereabouts. You don’t tell me what to do.”

“Sooner or later, Jupiter, I’ll find him.”

With one fat hand the criminal indicated his armed colleagues. “Haven’t you realized, sir, that you won’t leave my little floating hideaway alive?”

Cap met Jupiter’s gaze. “Let’s skip the threats. Just tell me where you took Crandell.”

“You’re an annoyingly persistent chap. I find—”

Captain America was all at once in motion. He dodged to the right, at the same time sending his shield spinning at the nearest gunman.

“Yow!” remarked that gentleman. He dropped his Luger and began hopping backward in pain.

Two shots, one from each of the two remaining gunmen, converged on the place where Cap had been an instant before.

But he was no longer there. He’d dived and somersaulted over the desk, managing to grab up a small object that had caught his eye several moments before. Then he snatched up the wooden throne, and tossed it through the air.

“Unk!” observed the hood who was hit. His head gave off an impressively hollow thud, his eyes hazed, his pistol fell from his limp fingers. Folding up, he fell over onto the rich carpet.

Captain America, moving almost too rapidly to be seen, had retrieved his shield. He threw it while ducking a shot from the gun of the last standing gunman.

The red, white, and blue shield sizzled into the man’s middle. Then Cap, after executing another impressive somersault, planted his red-booted feet against the man’s chest.

The gunman exhaled loudly, let go of his automatic and toppled to one knee.

Cap dealt him a choppy blow to the neck that laid him out cleanly atop another of his fallen associates.

Pivoting, Captain America picked up his shield in time to ward off the slug from the small .32 revolver Jupiter had produced.

Grinning, Cap charged at the fat man.

He never reached him.

Jupiter had whirled around and jabbed at a button set in the wall.

The floor opened, sending Cap plummeting down into the murky waters of the East River.

Down and down he went before he began using his powerful arms and legs to push himself toward the surface.

Suddenly he found himself being pulled off his desired course.

This was no ordinary scow, Jupiter’s floating headquarters. The craft was powered by a mighty engine, and its propellers had started to spin. They were thrashing away at the dark water.

The suction began tugging at Cap, pulling him away from the air he sought and toward the deadly chopping blades.

Five

It was like a snowing globe. The tiny stars flickered down endlessly outside, flecking the window with thousands of splotches of white. The lights of the chalet tinted some of the snowflakes a pale yellow as they fell.

The girl pressed her fingers against the thick glass of the leaded pane. The cold of the night flowed into her fingertips, but she kept her hand there. “You didn’t have to,” she said, her warm breath misting the chill rectangle of glass.

“I had to.” The older man was slouched in an armchair near the small stone fireplace. Its crackling flames changed his gaunt face into a series of orange hollow-eyed masks.

“Because of me?” asked Caroline Crandell.

Her father continued to stare at the fire. “You haven’t met him,” he said finally. “You haven’t talked to him, heard his —”

“I’d like to.” She turned abruptly, her long blond hair brushing at her slim shoulders. “I’d tell him what I—”

“Carrie, you don’t realize the kind of man he is.”

“The kind of man who’s been able,” she said forlornly, “to frighten you.”

Dr. Gregory Crandell nodded. “Yes, he is frightening. That mask . . . if it is a mask . . . staring at you, the eyes expressionless, the mouth always frozen in a macabre grin. The grin of death itself.” His thin hands gripped the arms of his chair and he suddenly shuddered. “There’s nothing he won’t do, Carrie. Believe me, I’ve seen him . . .”

She moved closer to her father. “They’ve *used* your sonic guns, haven’t they?”

“From what I can gather, yes.”

“Dad, don’t you understand what that means? He’s used them on . . . on real cities. To destroy human beings, old people, little kids, everyone. We’re talking about the death of countless thousands of completely innocent—”

“I’ve told myself all this already,” cut in her father. “But I also know there’s one life more important to me than all the others. Your life.”

“My god, dad, you can’t—”

“Yes, I can.” He stood up, a tall frail man in a rumpled tweed suit. “You have no idea at all what this man might do to you unless I comply. Kill you, yes, but before you were dead, he’d . . . I can’t allow anything like that to happen.”

“So you’ve given him the secret of your sonic weapon, let this madman kill, destroy—”

“Carrie, we’re trapped,” said Crandell. “I’ve been trying to stall him. But even now I realize . . . eventually . . . I must capitulate.”

“What more does he want from you?”

Her father shook his head. “Something I’d rather not talk about . . . not yet, Carrie.”

“We have to stand up to him,” she insisted, catching hold of his frail arm. “Fight back.”

“How? This man was able to pluck me out of my everyday life in New Haven and . . .” He nodded at the dark window and the heavily falling snow. “. . . and bring me here. I don’t even have any memory of exactly how it happened. One minute I was parking my car behind the neosonic labs, the next I was here. Wherever the devil here is—New England, the Alps. And then you. Three weeks after I was brought here and forced to work for him they caught you. He’d promised me you wouldn’t be touched if I . . . cooperated with him and his technicians.”

“You see? He lied. He’s lying now, dad,” she said. “He’ll force exactly what he wants out of you, then kill us both. Okay then, that’s a very unpleasant thing to face. But let’s accept it and act like people with a little bit of courage. Let’s defy him.”

Dr. Crandell tore his arm away from her grasp. “Forgive me, Carrie,” he said slowly. “I don’t think anyone has the strength to defy the Red Skull.”

Six

They met in public, at the open-air restaurant in the vast many-tiered lobby of Houston’s Sheridan-Showcase Hotel. They sat at a circular table with a crisp white cloth on it. They ate and drank out of crystal and silver dishes. Just another dinner meeting of two businessmen, nothing too unusual about that.

Of course, one of them was somewhat odd in appearance. He was completely hairless; he didn’t even have a trace of eyebrow. He wore a monocle in the manner of the long-forgotten Erich Von Stroheim, and his right arm was made of metal.

Baron Graff picked up his highly polished wineglass with his highly polished metal hand. He was saying, “Exactly my point, Mr. Klise.”

Klise was in his early forties, dark-haired and trim, his face browned with a deep outdoor tan. He had a soft Texas drawl. “You are absolutely right, baron,” he said, pausing to light his very costly cigar. “I am, I have to admit, one of the richest men in a state noted for its rich men. Yet, suh, I

haven’t been able to acquire enough of the one thing I most want.”

“Power,” said the baron in a rasping whisper, smiling across the rim of his wineglass. “Power, Herr Klise, is what you crave, what you lust after. You live, however, in a foolish society where it is very difficult to achieve the sort of absolute power you dream of.”

“That is for sure, suh,” agreed Klise as he puffed on his cigar. “Now, Texas isn’t as bad as some of those states back East. Like New York, where they let the Jews run everything and let the coloreds live off welfare. Thing is, suh, I don’t think, the way things are going, it’s ever going to get better. Right here at home, if a man tries to put a Mexican in his place, those liberal Jews in the media come down here and put you on TV.” He shook his head, breathing out swirls of smoke. “Thought back when we got rid of Kennedy, things might improve. But they sure didn’t.”

“America will never act sensibly about its inferior races,” Baron Graff told him. “Never apply the logical solution, which worked so well in my own country. Not unless . . . ah, but here’s our dessert.”

They paused in their conversation while a Mexican waiter placed a wedge of apple pie in front of the baron and a piece of cheesecake before Klise.

“Boy, what is this?” asked Klise.

“Cheesecake, sir.”

“I distinctly recall, and you ought to as well, boy, ordering the cheesecake *with* strawberry sauce. Do you recall that at all, boy?”

“I’m sorry, sir.” The young waiter reached for the plate. “I’ll return this and see—”

“Yes, you do just that,” said Klise. “Or you have my word you won’t be working at this high-class restaurant any longer, boy.”

Smiling, tapping his dessert fork against the edge of his dish, Baron Graff waited until the young Mexican had hurried away across the crowded room. “You see, they can never learn.”

“Like to run them all back across the border where they belong.”

“When,” said the baron in a low voice, “our New Order is established, Herr Klise, you’ll be able to do exactly that. All of this great state will be yours, to rule, to do with as you wish.”

“Like to stick all the coloreds in pens,” said Klise, running his tongue over his upper lip. “Wish that greaser would hurry up with my cheesecake. I am truly fond, suh, of ending a meal with a sweet.”

“Here he is, Herr Klise.”

“Sorry, sir.” The waiter placed a piece of cheesecake liberally covered with strawberry sauce before the suntanned businessman.

“That’s better,” said Klise. “Not great, but a damn sight better, boy.”

After the waiter departed, the baron took a bite of his apple pie. “May I tell my superior you will cooperate, Herr Klise?”

“You darn well can, suh.” Klise was hurrying forkfuls of red-smeared cheesecake into his mouth, swallowing the bites whole. “I’m one hundred percent behind you, baron. I can arrange everything that needs to be arranged.”

“Initially, we must have access to a shuttle,” said the baron. “Probably within the week. That depends on . . . certain details that have yet to be worked out.”

“I can fix that,” promised Klise. “You already know, suh, how powerful Texon Telecom Industries is in this state. I have some very good connections as a result, and what you

want can be arranged with no one in the government being any wiser. Until, that is, it’s much too late.”

“Fine,” said the baron. “Once certain equipment is set up in the satellite, then we’ll be ready to move.”

Excitement showed in Klise’s eyes. Wiping at his lips with his crisp white napkin, he said, “We’re that close, are we?”

“Yes, Herr Klise,” answered Baron Graff. “The birth of the Fourth Reich is very near.”

Seven

He was winning.

Muscle-laden arms windmilling, legs slicing at the scummy East River water, Captain America was fighting free of the deadly pull of the propellers.

He struggled, succeeded, knew he was heading away from the slashing knife-edged blades. Frog-kicking, Cap went swimming free of the scow.

His powerful lungs craved air, but the star-spangled crusader remained under water. He was determined to put more distance between himself and that deadly garbage scow.

Pain was flowing through him, his broad chest ached. He must have air, very soon.

Cap forced himself to keep swimming.

Finally, he allowed himself to rise. He felt as though he were climbing upward in a very slow elevator, as though he’d never reach the surface.

Then he passed from one kind of blackness into another. He opened his mouth, sucked in a lungful of night air.

Then he became aware of lights, the bobbing lights of the river craft and the steady lights on the near shore. After another deep and satisfying inhalation, he set off for land.

Jupiter's scow was a good distance behind and there was no attempt to pursue him.

The chubby man in the barber jacket reached up to the sign dangling from the shade on the barbershop door. He turned it around so that it read CLOSED.

A few seconds later a tall broad-shouldered man in a tan trench coat and soft-brim hat approached the door and knocked.

Shrugging, the barber pointed to the sign. Behind him his manicurist, a pretty, dark-haired girl, was jiggling into a coat with an imitation fur collar. She glanced at the man outside, then said something to the plump barber. They both laughed.

The man in the trench coat repeated his knock.

The barber came closer to the locked door, gesturing at the CLOSED sign.

The man outside made a gesture involving three fingers.

Unlocking the door, the barber opened it a few inches. "Just closing up, mac."

"Look, I've got an important meeting tonight. I really have to have a haircut."

"Give the guy a break, Tony," urged the manicurist.

Tony opened the door wider. "Okay, it's been a slow day, I can use a few extra bucks." He let the man into a small shop, then pulled the door shade all the way down and relocked the door.

The barber glanced down at the black and white linoleum. “Looks like you’re dripping, mac.”

The man glanced down at his booted feet. “I just came out of the East River.”

“That’s a lousy place to go swimming,” said the pretty manicurist. “Especially with your clothes on, hon.”

“It was a sudden impulse,” said Captain America.

“You better dry off in the back room,” suggested Tony as he moved to the barbershop’s street window. “Nobody followed you, Cap.”

“Only a mermaid could have used the route I took,” he said.

The spurious barber escorted him across the checkerboard floor. He pushed aside a curtain that hung over a doorway on the inner wall. “Nick’s been anxious about you.”

Captain America shrugged himself out of the trench coat, and doffed his hat. “Is he turning into a mother hen in his declining years?” he asked, laughing. “Doesn’t sound like the Nick Fury I know.”

“Nick thinks you take a lot of unnecessary risks.”

“Nick and I are both very fond of this country of ours,” Captain America said. “Sometimes, though, he and I disagree about how best to serve her. I suppose my methods are more direct than his.”

“You do like to walk right into things. That’s for sure.” The barber crossed the small back room, approached a full-length mirror, and touched the face of it at a certain spot. The mirror slid aside, revealing a dimly lit corridor that slanted downward.

“Through the looking glass,” murmured Cap as he entered the corridor.

“You ought to sit in a sauna for a while, after a dip in that polluted river,” advised Tony. The secret panel was sliding

shut.

At the lower end of the corridor Captain America was met by a young black man who was sitting on a high red stool, a submachine gun resting across his knees.

“You got Captain America’s suit on,” he said. “And you look pretty much like him.”

“Banana oil,” said Cap.

The young guard nodded. “Yep, that’s today’s password,” he said. “Meaning you got to be the one and only star-spangled champion of justice, opponent of tyranny, and all around brave and fearless—”

“You’ve been around Nick too long, Ellis,” said Captain America. “You’re growing cynical.”

“Naw, I’ve had some shots against that, Cap.” He reached back, flipped a toggle on the wall.

A section of wall slid open to show a longer and more shadowy slanting ramp.

There was no guard at the end of this one. Captain America tugged off his scarlet right-hand gauntlet, pressed his palm against the seemingly solid brick wall.

From within the wall came a click. The scanning plate his hand was resting on had recognized his fingerprints. A door-sized section of brick wall swung inward.

Cap strolled into a well-lit circular room. The walls were metallic, dotted with television monitor screens, computer terminals, and various other gadgetry. Several technicians were busy in the large domed room.

Standing wide-legged in the room’s exact center was a large man in a dark jumpsuit. Over his left eye was a black eyepatch, and clenched between his teeth was a fuming cigar. “Hey, kiddies!” he bellowed when he saw Cap. “Everybody salute. Here comes the flag.”

Eight

Trailing smoke, Nick Fury went striding across the room. “C’mon, Cap,” he invited. “I wanna talk to ya.”

Captain America followed the SHIELD leader through another doorway and into a small cluttered office.

From this underground facility, Fury ran the operations of the Supreme Headquarters, Intelligence Espionage Law-enforcement Division.

Behind his metal desk, his single eye narrowed, his cigar spouting acrid smoke, the dark-haired Fury said, “I hear ya went for a swim.”

“It was Jupiter’s idea.” Cap settled into a metal chair facing his feisty friend and cohort.

Fury removed the cigar from between his teeth. “So ya found Jupiter, huh?”

“He found me, Nick,” Cap replied. “I had a hunch he’d look me up if I put enough pressure on his hoods and their activities.”

Fury snorted. “Ya take too many chances, old buddy,” he accused. “Just because ya go around wrapped up in the red,

white, and blue don’t mean you’re immune. Guys like Jupiter don’t care if they spit on the flag. Why don’t ya take advantage of all the scientific junk we got? Instead of barging around like a bear with a bumblebee up its—”

“Nick, we’ve had this debate before. I don’t have the patience to operate the way SHIELD does,” said Captain America. “We want to locate Dr. Crandell, and we suspect Jupiter was involved in the abduction.”

Fury inserted his cigar between his teeth. “Okay, so ya went banging into this bozo’s lair,” he said, smoke billowing out his nose. “What’d ya get for yer trouble, old buddy?”

Reaching into his belt, Cap produced a soggy wad of paper. “This,” he said.

“A lottery ticket?”

“Once a matchbook, Nick,” he said. “Issued by a place in Vermont. Ski lodge known as Snow Hills, a very exclusive place.”

“So? Next time I’m hobnobbing with my jet-set pals, I’ll mention the joint to ’em.”

“Odd thing for Jupiter to have.” Captain America tossed the lump of paper onto the desk top. “Odd thing to have on his desk in an East River scow, Nick.”

“Upward mobility,” suggested Fury. “Anyway, I seen bums who got matches from the Plaza.”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Ya got a theory?”

“I think maybe Jupiter or one of his henchmen was up in Vermont recently. In the town of Mottsville, where the Snow Hills lodge is located.”

“Meaning what? That they stashed the doc up in ski country?”

“Seems a possibility.”

“Aw,” commented Fury, grinding out his cigar in a metal ashtray.

“Well, I’m going to head up there, Nick. Unless SHIELD wants to take over the—”

“Naw, you handle it.” Fury frowned. “We ain’t been able to come up with anything else, ya know. It’s like Doc Crandell and that knockout daughter of his just vanished. We came up with that one lead on Jupiter and that’s all.” He made a fist and shook it at his friend. “Listen, now we know where that bozo is, I’ll grab him. We got ways to make him spill the beans.”

“Wait awhile, Nick.”

“Wait? Cripes, Cap, the longer we wait, the more cities go blooey. Wanna see some pix of what it looks like in Kitambaa now?”

Captain America shook his head. “I know what Crandell’s sonic weapon is capable of,” he said. “Which is why I want to find him. But I think this is a real lead. If you lean on Jupiter too hard, it might make them move Crandell and the girl.”

Fury yanked open a desk drawer and took out a fresh stogie. “Okay, I’ll give ya another day, Cap,” he growled. “The proverbial twenty-four hours ta find Doc Crandell. After that, SHIELD really gets into the act. Got me?”

Nodding, Captain America said, “We’re not just dealing with organized crime here.”

“That I know, old buddy,” said Fury. “In fact, at the risk of sounding paranoid, I got to say I think we’re up against our old nemesis.”

“Yes, the Red Skull,” said Cap.

“That’s who I mean.”

“The wanton destruction, the senseless killing, it all follows his pattern.”

“We shoulda kept a better watch on Doc Crandell,” said Fury while unwrapping the new cigar. “Hell, I didn’t find out what kind of work the old coot was doing until after he got glommed. A typical bureaucratic flub.”

“We try to cover as many bases as we can, Nick. Once in a while we slip.”

Fury’s fist came down, smacking his desk. “I don’t like ta slip up. It riles me.”

“We’ve still got a chance to stop this.” Cap stood up. “Okay, I’ll be on my way to Vermont.”

“Bundle up, Cap,” advised Fury. “Better buy yaself a star-spangled overcoat.”

Captain America grinned and left the room.

Fury sat with his unlit cigar balanced on his thumb and forefinger. *I shouldn’t razz him so much,* he thought. *He’s a terrific guy, even if he is sort of gung ho.*

He clipped the cigar, popped it into his mouth and lit it. Smoke swirled around his grizzled temples.

Known the guy for years, since back during World War Deuce, reflected Fury, leaning back in his chair. *And he ain’t no older-looking now than he was back then. ’Course I know why. Yeah, I know all about Captain America and how he got that way . . .*

Nine

. . . 1941. That was a hell of a long time ago.

A completely different world than the one we've got now.

Supposed to be a better world these days. Cleaner, safer, more humane.

Sure, maybe so. But back then in those months before Pearl Harbor, while everybody was waiting for Hitler to drop the other shoe, there'd been some damn good times.

Take dancing. Nick Fury had been good at it then, two good eyes and not quite as thick around the middle, with no touch of gray in his hair, and his face without that knocked-around look. Why, on most any given weekend around Manhattan you could catch Benny Goodman or Duke Ellington or maybe Artie Shaw. If you were more in the mood for sitting and listening you'd find Art Tatum at the Café Society.

Lots of other kinds of music poured out of your radio, or the jukeboxes, around town. Some of it was sort of nutty—stuff like "Six Lessons from Madame LaZonga" and "The

Hut-Sut Song.” ’Course what you really got out of the radio was comedy—Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Charlie McCarthy. You got good old FDR, too, and a fireside chat right from the White House. You could hear the fights, listen to Joe Louis knock out the latest stumblebum who was taking a crack at the heavyweight crown. Or that Detroit Tigers-New York Yankees game where Hank Greenberg got his last two homers before going into the army.

Lots of guys going into the service then. The draft had started, sure, but there were volunteers, too. You could tell a war was coming and America was sure to be in it. In those long ago days, there was nothing wrong with volunteering.

Steve Rogers was a kid then, barely out of his teens. Not much to look at. He wasn’t ugly or anything, just sort of scrawny. Tall gangling guy who looked like he hadn’t quite grown all the way up or maybe hadn’t sent away for as many Charles Atlas lessons as he should have. Yeah, Steve Rogers was the kind of kid that bullies would pick on at the beach.

Well, that was before he volunteered for an experiment. One of the strangest experiments anybody’d ever come up with, especially back in ’41 when nuclear bombs and rayguns and spaceships were found only in pulp magazines and those new comic books.

One spring morning Steve Rogers had decided to enlist in the army. He didn’t have much in the way of family ties or responsibilities. Even then he’d had a strong faith in his country, and he believed he had to do what he could to protect it. He’d grown up hearing Hitler rant and rave over the radio, he’d seen the Führer and his pal Mussolini strutting around in the newsreels. He’d seen footage showing the refugees, too, and the German planes strafing them. He went down to the induction center.

There was a snag. They wouldn’t take him. Turned him down flat. Nick Fury had once, in a moment of excessive

curiosity, dug out the records of that long ago physical exam Steve Rogers had taken. And he'd shaken his head when he read it over. That well-meaning Rogers kid had been in lousy shape. Underweight, anemic, with a weak heart, respiratory problems, allergies . . . and a whole stewpot of other problems.

They turned him down, told him he'd get a card in the mail to carry around in his wallet. The card would tell the world that Steve Rogers was 4-F. Little old ladies in wheelchairs would probably be inducted into the U.S. Army before this kid would.

"But you've got to take me," Rogers pleaded with the final army doc he saw. "Listen, I hate war, hate what the Nazis stand for. I don't want to stay behind while others are doing the fighting."

No dice. The doc was sympathetic, but there was no way he could pass a wreck like Steve Rogers. He advised him to put his clothes back on and go home. Maybe he could find a civilian job, someplace in defense or in Washington, so he'd feel he was doing his part.

Forlorn, his narrow shoulders hunched over more than usual, the kid went trudging out of the induction center. He'd covered about a quarter of a block when fate caught up with him and suddenly changed his life forever.

Fate was a husky guy in the uniform of an American army colonel. He was gray-haired, with a clipped military moustache. "My boy," he said, "I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying back there. All about how you want to serve your country. I admire a lad with spirit."

"Can you maybe fix it, sir, so I can get into some branch of —"

"What I have in mind is something else, something rather dangerous, Rogers." He put a hand on the young man's

shoulder. “Would you be willing to volunteer for an experiment?”

“What kind of experiment? What’s this about danger?”

“Frankly, Rogers, you’ll be risking your life,” the colonel told him. “However, if the experiment’s a success, which most of us are confident it will be, the United States will benefit greatly.”

“Can you tell me any more about it?”

“I’d rather have Dr. Erskine himself tell you. That is, if you agree to help.”

“You don’t mean Dr. Jonah Erskine?” The kid blinked. “I was reading about him in *Life* a few weeks ago. He’s one of the most brilliant biochemists in the world.”

“Yes, and he’s now devoting himself full time to the defense of America,” said the colonel. “Our need for a volunteer is rather urgent. Can you come with me right now and meet Erskine?”

Steve held out his hand. “You bet I will,” he said.

They took Steve Rogers, in a zigzagging roundabout way, to what looked like a dingy antique shop over on Third Avenue. Drove the kid there in a very sturdy limo. Besides the brass hat, there were two three-piece-suit guys in the car. Obviously Secret Service. And the guy driving had a bulge under his left arm that could only have been a holster.

The antique store smelled of dust, mildew, old perfume, and lost time. A sweet-faced old lady with a shawl over her shoulders broke out in smiles when she saw the group enter her shop. They exchanged a little phony gab about the furniture in case anybody was watching, then the old dame led them into a back room and up a creaky staircase.

“I’ll stay out here on guard.” Suddenly the woman’s voice got a lot younger, and a very impressive Colt revolver materialized from under her apron.

The colonel and the Secret Service boys hustled Rogers through a doorway, along a hallway, then through another door.

The kid did a double-take—he found himself in an enormous scientific lab. There were all sorts of massive machines and complicated gizmos, the whole setup reminded him of a Universal horror flick. Except it was all real, and standing there in a white lab smock was the renowned Dr. Jonah Erskine himself.

He shook Steve Rogers's hand, and then explained things to him. "I've developed a new serum, young man. It will, so I believe, be able to transform a frail young fellow such as yourself into a muscular, sturdy fighting man. In addition to the physical changes, the serum will cause psychological ones. You will become mentally stronger, fearless."

"How does it—?"

"The actual formula," said Erskine, smiling at the kid, "is a secret. At this point even the United States government, which has financed my researches, doesn't know it." He tapped the side of his gray head. "In fact, the Erskine Formula recipe is known only here. Suffice it to say, young man, that it will work on the cells of your body in such a way that their growth will accelerate. You will, in a matter of minutes, be functioning at the maximum of your capacity. You will become, so we hope, a superior human being. Not exactly a super human, but close to it. You can understand, I'm certain, how valuable such a discovery is to America. To a country on the brink of a possibly devastating war such a process would be a real boon. It would mean that every one of our fighting men could become a superior being—strong, courageous."

The Rogers kid nodded. "I think I understand, sir."

"To date my serum has been tested only on lab animals," the doc continued, "with most gratifying results. We have not yet tested it on a human being."

“You will today,” said Rogers. “I’m ready if you are. Dr. Erskine.”

The old guy chuckled. “Very well, we’ll proceed at once. Will you roll up your sleeve, please,” he said. “Colonel, if you and your party will join my other visitors behind the glass wall.”

Rogers noticed now that the far wall was made out of glass. There were three official-looking guys standing behind it, watching, each of them holding on to a fat briefcase.

While the colonel and the Secret Service guys got out of the lab, Doc Erskine filled a big hypo with a strange bluish fluid. “I’d like you, young man,” he instructed the Rogers kid, “to stand over here on this raised platform.”

Steve did as he was told, stepping up onto a small dais in front of the nozzle of a huge gadget that reminded him of an X-ray machine. Only a hell of a lot bigger, like something you might use to X-ray an elephant.

He was nervous and excited, so he hardly felt it when Erskine thrust the needle into his puny arm.

“You will experience various new sensations,” said the doc, his voice starting to sound faraway. “If you feel any severe pain in the chest, tell me at once.”

Rogers felt odd all right, like his blood was circulating twice as fast as usual and trying to shoot right out of his body. He felt hot, cold, dizzy, euphoric.

“Try to remain perfectly still,” instructed the doc as he stepped to the controls of the big ray gun that was pointing right at the kid’s scrawny chest. “You’ve passed through the first phase very well. If you survive the bombardment of vita-rays, the experiment will be a complete success. How are you feeling?”

The voice seemed to be coming at him from a long way off. So he shouted his answer. “Fine, just fine. Little woozy is all.”

“We’ll proceed. You will not feel any pain when the rays strike your body,” said Erskine, adding, “good luck.”

“Same to you,” His voice didn’t sound like it was his anymore.

There was a faint hum, and than he was bathed in a scarlet glow.

“. . . will surge with new power, new vigor . . .”

Apparently Doc Erskine was explaining the goings-on to the gang behind the glass.

Rogers didn’t catch much of it. He was yelling. At least he thought he was. With his head reared back, his arms spread wide, he was swaying on the pedestal. The scarlet glow abruptly ceased.

The room seemed to rush at him, to blare into his brain. He realized he was seeing everything with an incredible new clarity. He brought a hand up to rub at his eyes.

“Good lord,” he said.

His hand was enormous, his arm strong and muscular. He gazed down at his chest, saw that it had expanded so much that his shirt had been ripped in two. It was as though he was inside a brand-new body. He felt power, felt the new strength that filled him. “Dr. Erskine,” he said, laughing with joy, “it’s a success. It worked.”

Nodding, happy, the gray-haired scientist said, “Yes, young man, the process is beyond a doubt going to mean—”

A gun sounded. Once, twice.

Bullets had found the doctor’s chest, ripped into him, smeared red over his smock. He made a sad, coughing noise before tumbling forward into Rogers’s powerful arms.

“The experiment is over!” someone shouted.

Rogers turned around swiftly. He saw that one of the watchers, an ordinary-looking middle-aged guy, had come into the room. His briefcase was dangling open and he held

a smoking Luger in his fist. And a look of incredible hatred in his glaring eyes.

“The Third Reich will overcome the world!” he cried. “Erskine’s work is finished!”

Rogers went striding toward the man.

The gun swung in his direction.

But he was incredibly swift, this new and improved Steven Rogers. He dodged the slug that came sizzling at him.

Then he was on top of the Nazi agent, delivering a terrific punch to his jaw, followed by a left to the ribs. It was as good as anything Joe Louis could dish out.

The Nazi agreed. He didn’t even try to fight back, instead he tried to run.

But Rogers wouldn’t let him get away. He caught the guy by the neck and lifted him up off the floor.

Then he smacked him in the face. The force of it sent the Nazi assassin flying—flying right into one of the late Doc Erskine’s machines.

There was a lot of electrical crackling, and sparks shot every which way. The guy screamed. When the smoke cleared there was a dead German agent sprawled out beside the body of the man he’d murdered.

By this time the colonel and the Secret Service agents and the other VIPs were all in the lab.

“What a tragedy,” said the colonel. “Erskine’s formula known to him only, and now he’s dead. We know the process works, but there’s nothing we can do.”

Rogers looked at him, long and hard. His voice was considerably deeper now, and when he spoke people listened. “You’re forgetting me, colonel,” he said evenly.

The brass hat said, “But you’re only one man. What can you do?”

“Plenty,” Steve Rogers assured him. “No man fights as well as when he’s battling to rid the earth of tyranny. And that’s going to be my purpose for the rest of my life.”

He meant it, too.

Right there in the ruined lab, with the body of the old scientist at his feet, Steve Rogers became Captain America.

Within a few days he’d come up with the costume, the shield, the new name for himself.

He’d always been a patriotic kid, and when he turned into a superior human being he held on to his faith. So his costume was built around the American flag.

Now maybe if Doc Erskine had lived, the U.S.A. would eventually have had a whole army of super soldiers. That didn’t happen, but Cap alone was plenty impressive. Spies, fifth columnists, Nazi agents, war profiteers—none of them had any reason to like that star-spangled crusader.

And today the guy didn’t look a day older than when he had first slipped into that chain-mail tunic. Well, there was a good reason for that. Because . . .

A red telephone on Nick Fury’s desk started to beep. His reverie ended and he picked it up.

“Yeah?” he boomed. “What’s hit the fan now?”

Ten

The corridor was long, shadowy, and cold. Its windows were completely masked by the heavy drapes. The thick somber carpeting muffled Baron Graff’s footfalls.

The stocky, hairless Nazi was still several paces away from the thick wooden door at the corridor’s end when a scream sounded.

It was soon followed by another bloodcurdling shriek.

The door burst open. A whimpering man came stumbling out, his pale face streaked with blood. He stumbled again, bumped into the wall, slid down to his knees. He rested his bloody head against the wall, sobbing. It was obvious he’d been struck several times across the face with some kind of whip.

Baron Graff stepped around the cowering man and entered the room he’d come staggering out of. Just across the threshold the baron clicked his heels together, raising his metal hand in a straight-arm salute. *“Heil!”*

The room’s sole occupant stood in the shadows beyond a floor lamp. The yellow light from the bulb illuminated the streaks of blood on the riding crop that the figure still held in his gloved hands. “I cannot tolerate fools,” he said in his guttural voice.

The baron closed the door behind him. “I assure you’re alluding to that wretch in the hall and not to myself, Herr Skull.”

The Red Skull gestured at his desk, where a tray of food rested. “I ordered a corned beef on Russian rye and he brings it on pumpernickel,” he said. “Unforgivable.”

“Unforgivable,” agreed Baron Graff, clearing his throat.

The Red Skull, making an angry grunting noise, moved behind his desk and flung the bloody riding crop aside. It hit the immense globe which stood behind the desk, splattering several countries with red, then bounced away and was swallowed by the heavy shadows beyond the circle of lamplight.

Placing his gloved hands on the desk top, the Red Skull leaned forward. This brought his face into the light.

The baron’s self-control was such that he was able to suppress an impulse to shudder and avert his eyes.

In place of a head, a bright crimson skull rested on the other man’s shoulders—a distorted skull, with a perpetual mocking grin.

Baron Graff knew it was only a mask—and yet . . .

“Your interview with Klise was satisfactory?” said the Skull.

“Ja. It went very well indeed.” The baron moved closer to the desk. “The fool actually believes he’ll play an important role when the glorious Fourth Reich is established. He will cooperate completely.”

“Gut.”

The baron was, inwardly at least, not completely thrilled that his master was pleased with him. Because that

pleasure produced a laugh from the Red Skull. And it was a horrible, mirthless, nerve-rasping laugh.

"Ja, Klise will be put in his place all right," continued the Skull. "In a mass grave along with all our other dupes."

"From now on we must move very rapidly, Herr Skull," urged Baron Graff. "Is Dr. Crandell ready to assist us with the final installations?"

Seating himself, the Red Skull steepled his fingers against his scarlet chin. "A bit more persuasion is needed perhaps."

"You've been much too lenient with that old *hund,"* the baron told him as he adjusted his monocle. "I'd run Crandell through one of our admirable torture suites. Then he'd beg you to allow him to do what's needed."

Another laugh that sounded like fingernails grating across rough slate. "The doctor is a very valuable machine, dear baron." The Red Skull stood, turned to the globe and started it spinning slowly. "Rough treatment would ruin his ability to function well. I believe I have come up with a way, however, to give him the final nudge toward compliance."

"And that is?"

"You will soon see," promised the Red Skull.

Eleven

The private jet was zooming through the night. The extremely lovely auburn-haired girl who sat in the pilot's seat suddenly tossed her head back and said, "Hooey!"

Jake Sheridan was hunkered down in the seat beside her. "I'm not up on all the latest juvenile slang, Amanda," he said. "Is that a negative comment?"

Amanda Twain nodded. "You can bet your duff it is, Jake," she informed him. "Conning Mixx into sending us off on this completely goofy mission just so you could be alone with me and make another of your feeble attempts at—"

"Listen, Amanda, if I ever decided, in some moment of complete and utter madness, to make a pass at you, it would not be feeble." He scowled. "That is not the reason for this jaunt. And if you'd been anywhere near our managing editor's office earlier today, you'd have heard my groans of pain when Mixx insisted I drag you along."

Amanda's lovely head bobbed up and down. "That I'll buy. You loathe me, I loathe you."

“Well put, especially from one who usually can’t string six words together without—”

“Sour grapes,” she cut in. “Because I almost got a Pulitzer Prize and you didn’t.”

Jake laughed. *“Almost?* Don’t tell me you believed that stringer from some boondock newspaper who claimed he had contacts on the prize jury? Hell, I saw the guy recently, peddling matches on a street corner in downtown Kansas City.”

“Tell me some more about this wild-goose chase we’re on.”

Jake folded his arms. “Let’s make a deal first, Amanda,” he suggested. “When this yarn has all America, nay, all the civilized world, awed, we’ll share on all the rewards and publicity. Okay? I mean, you don’t go on the *Tonight* show unless I tag along, and I won’t cohost with Mike Douglas unless you get invited.”

“This Dr. Crandell. Fill me in some more about the guy.”

“Don’t you read our magazine? *Newsmag* did an in-depth profile on Dr. Crandell six months ago.”

“C’mon, Jake. In our mag an indepth profile runs to about a thousand words,” said the girl, as she guided the jet toward their destination.

“Crandell is very big in sonic weaponry, the use of ultrahigh-frequency sound waves to destroy buildings. What you do is cause ’em to vibrate to pieces,” he explained. “Similar to the way an opera singer is supposed to be able to crack a wineglass with her voice. Only this kind of sound you don’t hear. Dr. Crandell was supposed to be developing a way to use ultrasonics on a grand scale. Grand enough to cause the sort of damage we’ve been seeing in Africa and South America lately.”

“You claim these quakes are fake, man-made,” said Amanda. “So far, though, nobody’s found any proof of that.”

“We’re going to dig up the proof, Mandy.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said. “Okay, here’s another thing for you to explain to me. How come no one else has suggested that the Crandell weapon might be responsible? I mean in the government and so on, some high government source or qualified expert.”

“C’mon now, Amanda, you think the United States government is going to come out and say, ‘Say, folks, we were developing this spooky weapon capable of destroying whole cities. Now it looks like some bad guys have swiped and are using it. Gee, maybe they’ll even use it on us.’ That’s not how to keep a low profile. Nobody official is going to talk. I know, I’ve tried to get ’em to. But I do know they’ve got agents from at least two cloak-and-dagger outfits hunting for Crandell right now.”

“What does that prove? Crandell’s an important man. Naturally Washington is anxious to find out what happened to him.”

“Funny coincidence, though, you’ve got to admit. Crandell disappears, then the fake quakes start. Here’s one more coincidence to consider. His daughter also vanished, a few weeks after he did.”

“But why grab her? He’s the one with the secrets.”

“She’d be very useful to them,” said Jake. “You want to put pressure on Dr. Crandell and get him to do what you want, you threaten to hurt his only daughter.”

After a few silent seconds Amanda said, “Sounds mildly plausible, Jake. But I’m still not convinced there’s a story here at all.”

“You will be,” he promised her.

Twelve

The night was ending; a thin gray light was showing along the horizon above the treetops. Captain America, again wearing a trench coat over his familiar red, white, and blue garb, lifted one hand from the steering wheel of the sleek sports car he was driving and flexed his powerful fingers. If everything went according to schedule, he'd be in Mottsville by sunrise.

Cap realized that Nick Fury thought he was obsessive about a couple of their problems. One of which was that consummate villain, the Red Skull. "Ya see that guy's hand everywhere," Fury had often said. "Bet ya expect to find him hiding under yer bed at night." Be that as it may, Captain America once again had a very strong hunch that the infamous Skull was involved in this latest wave of destruction. Almost certainly he'd played a part in the abduction of Dr. Crandell and his daughter.

Captain America had been fighting the Red Skull for a good many years. It went all the way back to the early days

of the Second World War. As he drove swiftly through the oncoming daylight Cap's thoughts drifted back to the Red Skull and how he'd become what he was . . .

Germany had been the starting point, in those bleak years after the First World War.

He had never known his parents, this boy who was to grow into one of the most ruthless men of the century, nor had he ever received any kindness or affection. What he knew was poverty, and hunger, and brutal treatment.

To survive, he did what a good many others were doing then. He lived by stealing. But in those early years—he wasn't more than seven or eight when he took to the streets—he was small and frail. So he wasn't always successful, and it was a good day when he managed to scrounge up enough for even one decent meal. Many times when he did manage to steal something of value, the bigger boys took it from him. And beat him besides. Left him lying in those mean alleys, laughed at him. He never cried, not once. Inside, though, he made promises to himself. He would not always be weak and small. Someday he would be strong, someday he would have power. Then they'd have to watch out.

He managed for a time, when he was in his early teens, to fall in with a gang of housebreakers. He had become very agile by this time, so he was able to serve them well. He ate better now, worked hard at building up his body. Eventually he was caught by the police, and he went to jail. Once out of jail, he roamed free again. Then he went back to prison—and so on.

When he came out of prison after his longest time behind bars, he noticed that there had been changes in his fatherland. Adolf Hitler was in power, and growing stronger every day. A new Germany was in the making, a strong and powerful Germany that would no longer be pushed around

by other countries. It seemed possible that someday Germany might well rule the whole world. And that, to him, was a vastly exciting thought.

He conceived the notion he might be able to bring off some successful burglaries if he was actually working inside one of the better hotels. There were wealthy people in Germany now, many more than there had been in the old days. And many of them traveled. It took some leverage, some lying, and some falsified papers, but the young man eventually managed to get a job as a bellboy—in a very fine hotel, in one of Germany's largest cities.

It was while he was thus employed that the Führer himself paid a visit to the town. He took over an entire floor of the hotel. One day the young man was called upon to carry a bucket of cracked ice up to Hitler's suite.

He sensed a tension in the air when he was admitted into the rooms by one of Hitler's uniformed minions.

Hitler was standing impatiently beside a round table, his fingers tapping on the polished surface. He was smaller than the bellboy had expected, and his face was sallow.

The boy also recognized a dark man in a black uniform who was standing at attention next to the table. He was the head of the dreaded Gestapo.

The great dictator paid no attention to the awed young man. Pointing an angry finger at his Gestapo chief, he shouted, "I am far from pleased, you blundering *Stachelbeere!"*

"But, *mein Führer,"* protested the other, "I have done the best I—"

"Ochse! You claim to have done the best you can, yet you fail," cried Hitler. "When you fail me, you fail the fatherland!"

"But—"

“What am I to do?” Hitler rolled his eyes, tugged at his toothbrush moustache, groaned. “The savior of all of Germany, yet I can find none to serve me well. Must I create my own race of Aryans to . . . ?” He suddenly paused.

The bellhop swallowed nervously, and the ice in the bowl chattered. The Führer stared directly at him.

“Ja, ja,” Hitler muttered. He reached out unexpectedly to slap the Gestapo chief across one fat jowl. “Do you see that idiotic bellhop there?”

“Ja, mein Führer!”

“I wager I could teach that imbecile to be a better Nazi than you.”

“But . . .”

“You!” Hitler motioned to the now trembling young man. “Come here.”

He managed to take a step forward.

“You are *null,* nothing, nobody. Is that not so?”

“Ja.”

“But you believe in me, have faith in me?”

“Ja.”

Hitler laughed, a wailing sort of laugh that had a touch of madness in it. “I am going to take charge of you and change you. I shall show all these fools what can be done with a willing subject. You will serve me, you will be my right arm and my greatest creation.” Eyes narrowing, the dictator took a step back from him. “What is your name?”

“I am called—”

“No, never mind, it’s unimportant.” The exhilarated Hitler gave himself a mild hug. “When I am finished with you, I’ll christen you myself.”

So when the Führer left to return to Berlin, the young man went with him. He was given his own private apartment, an impressive allowance, good warm clothes. He had never

lived like this before in his life. In the first week he gained nine pounds. And then his training began. Hitler himself supervised a good part of it.

At first the young thief didn't think he could survive. He went through a basic training twice as rough as that of any storm trooper. He was drilled, bullied, lectured, tested. Over and over. He was subjected to torture, so that he might better understand its techniques. He was then taken to one of the new concentration camps, where he was made to do the most horrible of jobs. He administered beatings, mutilations, torture of every kind, and he killed. Once he had hesitated a few seconds before gunning down a young girl and her child. For that he was tortured again, until he screamed and cried and begged to be allowed one more chance to serve his beloved Führer. The next time he did not hesitate. He had crossed over a border on to a one-way road. He would never feel compassion or remorse again. He had become, as Hitler had promised, the perfect Nazi.

His graduation was held at one of Hitler's hideaways. Before it began, he faced the dictator alone in his private suite.

Hitler was sitting in a straight-backed chair, a black satchel resting across his uniformed knees. "You have learned well."

"I have," agreed the young man with conviction.

"From this day on you will answer only to me," Hitler told him. "You have turned out so admirably I will use you on very special missions."

"As you wish, *mein Führer."*

The satchel clicked open and the dictator reached inside it. He lifted out something horrible.

Or rather something that might have looked horrible to the young bellhop who had come to Berlin nine long months before. But to the man who stood facing this twentieth-

century Napoleon, it was only a curious mask. A bright scarlet mask that had been made to resemble a grinning skull.

Hitler said, “You will wear this.” And he handed the crimson mask to his protégé.

The thick rubber disguise fit completely over his head.

Hitler stood up. “You are now . . . the Red Skull.”

“The Red Skull,” he repeated.

Thirteen

It really did work.

You actually could pick a lock with a hairpin. Caroline Crandell, kneeling by the door of the small bedroom where she'd been locked up for the night, had just discovered it.

After a few minutes of probing with the straightened hairpin, she had heard a satisfying click.

Holding her breath, she very slowly turned the handle. Then she gave a gentle, careful tug, and the heavy wooden door opened inward.

Caroline sighed. No alarms had gone off, no lights were flashing. She'd taken the first successful step toward escaping from the Red Skull's chalet.

When they'd abducted her, Caroline had been wearing a blouse, skirt, and a light cardigan sweater. She'd chosen to put on those clothes again tonight. When she'd been brought here a few simple changes of clothes had been provided, but she had nothing in the way of an adequate outdoor coat or boots.

Even so, with her heart beating fast and the door standing a few inches open, she did the best she could to prepare herself for the snowbound country outside.

She'd already pulled on extra stockings and gotten into the most substantial of the three pairs of shoes they'd given her. It was snowing hard again tonight, and a harsh wind was scraping at the leaded window of her room. The girl folded up the quilt from her bed and tucked it under one arm. That should provide at least some protection against the cold night.

She also picked up one of the heavy metal bookends from her bedside table. She wasn't experienced in this sort of thing, but it seemed to her that the bookend could serve as a weapon. Her determination was such that she'd be able to make a darn good try at conking someone over the head if she had to.

Caroline had no idea how far she'd have to travel to find help. For that matter, she was not even certain where she was. Not even what country she was in. There was a certain New England look to the bleak hills and sparse woodlands that surrounded the isolated chalet. But for all Caroline knew, Switzerland might look this way, too. She'd never been there.

Well, she'd worry about that when the time came. Right now the first order of the evening was to get clear of the chalet.

She would have felt much better, and more secure, if her father were coming with her. Yet she knew he'd never agree to an escape attempt. He was still much too frightened of the Red Skull.

So what she must do was get away, and get some help. There was simply no other choice.

The hallway was dark and empty.

Caroline eased out of her room, opening the door as little as possible and then closing it behind her. She stood with her slim back against it for a moment, waiting until she could see through the dimness of the long corridor. Hers was the only room on this floor.

She could hear nothing but the wind as it brushed against the drape-covered windows.

She'd waited until well after midnight to break out. Most of them ought to be asleep by now, but there would obviously be guards. Pressing the heavy bookend to her side, she began walking, slowly, into the darkness.

Somebody laughed.

No, nothing to worry about. It was a long way off. Another part of the house, a man laughing loudly and drunkenly.

Caroline got her breath back under control and continued along the dark hall. She'd walked this path several times a day since she'd been a prisoner here. But it seemed much longer tonight.

Finally, up ahead, she saw the dim outline of the banister and the newel posts. That stairway would take her down to the second floor and—

Suddenly she stopped dead.

Someone was coming up those stairs.

Someone large and heavy, judging from the sound of his footfalls on the steps.

Caroline backed away, taking care not to trip.

The footsteps were growing louder. In a few more seconds, the man coming up the stairs would be in a position to see her.

The drapes! She moved quickly over to one of the windows and ducked behind the hanging drapery. It hid her completely.

He was coming nearer.

The top of the stairs.

The hallway.

He reached the spot where she was hiding.

Passed.

Caroline allowed herself one very cautious breath.

He went all the way to the end of the hall.

She heard the knob of her room door rattle.

If it opened, he'd know.

But it didn't. Pulling the door shut she must have locked it again.

Was he going to unlock the door, make sure she was still in there?

No sound for several silent seconds. The windowpane breathed cold on her neck.

Then the footfalls again.

Coming back toward her.

Closer.

And closer.

Was he slowing down?

No, he kept going.

Away from her.

Down the stairs.

Gone.

The girl stayed where she was. She counted off the seconds. One minute. Two. When roughly five had gone by, she risked stepping out from behind the shelter of the drape.

The hall was empty again, the only sound that of the sharp night wind.

She started for the head of the stairs.

When she got there she halted and held on to the carved newel post. She felt very warm, and drops of perspiration

were forming on her forehead. She peered down the stairwell.

There was no sign of activity on the second floor of the chalet. She had learned since her imprisonment that most of the staff slept on that second floor. The ground floor was where the offices and some of the labs were. There were more levels below ground, though she'd never seen them. Her father knew what went on down there. More laboratories, but other things as well. Things he refused to talk about.

Well, no use stalling any longer.

Caroline went down the stairs.

One of the steps creaked.

The girl froze, hearing her own heartbeat in her ears.

Nothing happened.

She continued downward, her grip on the metal bookend tightening.

A door was opening.

Midway along the second-floor corridor she could see it slowly swinging outward, letting out a growing rectangle of yellow light.

Caroline ran the rest of the way down the stairs and pressed herself into the stairwell alcove.

". . . chance to get even tomorrow night," someone was saying.

"Always happy to take your money, Kurt," said another voice.

"No, no, I feel a lucky streak coming on."

"Luck isn't involved, Kurt, it's skill."

"Wait until tomorrow and find out, Otto."

A thickset man stepped out into the hallway. He nodded in at the occupant of the room he was leaving, chuckled and shut the door.

He hesitated in the dim-lit hall, glanced down at the alcove where the girl was huddled.

He knows I'm here!

Apparently not. Kurt turned in the opposite direction and went striding away. In a minute another door opened and closed.

The wind howled outside the chalet, rattling the shutters.

Caroline emerged from the darkness. She knew that on this second floor, at the other end of the hall, there was a way out. A wide wooden balcony stretched across the rear of the chalet, connected to the ground by a staircase.

But do they lock the door at night or not?

She didn't know, but it was a much less risky way out than the wide front doors. *Okay, try it and see. Might be able to pick the lock if there is one.*

To get to that door she must walk the full length of the hallway, pass the room where they'd been playing cards, pass a dozen rooms altogether.

No way around it. She had to try.

She noticed that her fingertips were blue and realized she'd been clutching the improvised weapon much too tightly. Relaxing her grip, Caroline left the alcove and began the long walk down the hall.

Two doors.

Four.

Six.

"Damn you!"

That came from the other side of the eighth door.

"I didn't come to your room to be pawed, Felix," said a woman. "I'm going to leave."

"Berta, don't go."

Caroline hurried on. Should Berta ignore her suitor's pleas she might come bursting into the hall at any second.

The tenth door.

Eleven.

Twelve.

And here was the door leading out to the balcony. It was rattling and shaking as the wind outside blew at it. A chill draft shot through, numbing the girl.

Caroline took hold of the cold knob.

It wouldn’t turn.

Try it the other way.

There! Wasn’t locked. The door opened. Snow came flurrying in out of the black night, brushing against her.

Caroline shoved against the force of the wind and scrambled out onto the snow-covered balcony. The wind was fighting her, trying to tear the door from her hand and send it slamming all the way open.

Struggling, she managed to pull it shut.

Her teeth started chattering. The wind threw snow in her eyes.

Take it easy, you’ll make it, she told herself.

Clumsily, her chilled hands shaking, she unfurled the quilt and draped it around her slim body like a cape. That was a little better.

The cold bit at her ankles as she stood on the snow-covered planking. She slogged to the stairway leading down to the back acres, her inadequate shoes filling with little piles of crisp snow.

Then she saw something that made her feel better. A long way off, through the trees on the right, she noticed a cluster of lights. Lights that meant houses and people.

Please, let there be somebody down there who can help me. Someone I can trust.

She reached the ground. No one was out here to stop her. She started toward the woods.

A new sound. It came to her through the howling of the wind.

Something crunching on the icy snow, something running.

Not a person.

An animal.

She began to run too, aiming for those tiny glowing lights so far away.

A snarling, a growling.

She glanced over her shoulder as she ran awkwardly through the nearly knee-deep snow.

A German shepherd was pursuing her. Not barking, only growling deep in its throat. It wore a spiked collar, and a spill of light from the retreating chalet made the spikes flash gold for an instant.

All at once, the quilt was ripped from her shoulders.

She stumbled, nearly fell.

The snarling dog had the blanket in its sharp teeth and was worrying it from side to side.

Caroline picked herself up and started running again.

The immense dog abandoned the quilt to come bounding after her.

She couldn’t keep it up. Her legs were going numb, and pain was squeezing at her temples. Her teeth were chattering wildly and she couldn’t stop them. She felt as though she were running in slow motion, dream-style, each step taking an eternity.

The dog was on her. Its paws hit her hard in the small of her back and shoved her violently forward. She fell flat out into the cold snow.

The dog’s teeth sank first into her shoulder, then found her wrist. Pain flashed like lightning up her arm.

She twisted, the snow closing around her, getting into her mouth and her eyes, while the snarling creature tore at her

flesh.

The bookend. She swung it, as hard as she could.

The dog yelped.

Again Caroline struck out at the animal's skull, and again. Then once more.

Whimpering the dog let go of her.

She hit it harder.

The whimpering ceased.

Pushing out with both of her icy hands, she got clear of the beast and rose unsteadily to her feet.

There were splashes of red all down her front and fuzzy little dots of red on the snow. Her blood, some of it.

She tugged a handkerchief out of her cardigan pocket and tied it as best she could around her bleeding arm. Fortunately, the dog hadn't damaged an artery or a vein.

She ought to go back for the blanket. Otherwise she might freeze before she reached those far-off lights.

"Rex! Rex!"

Who was Rex? This dog probably. Someone was calling for him from up at the chalet.

"Rex! Wo *bist du?"* Then whistling.

Yes, Rex was definitely the dog she'd killed.

Forget the quilt and get out of here as quickly she could.

Caroline ran into the woods.

Fourteen

“He was a very good animal,” observed Baron Graff from deep in his sturdy armchair. “Loyal.”

The Red Skull stood with his broad back to the roaring blaze in his office fireplace. “Only the Americans are sentimental over dogs.”

“Would it not perhaps have been wiser to—?”

“Everything is going exactly as I intended,” said the Skull firmly. Shadows were dancing along his crimson head. “The girl has been allowed to escape. She will make her way to town, where she’ll attempt to get help.”

“Then the authorities will come storming in here—”

“She will almost certainly contact SHIELD,” said the Red Skull. “She’s a very perceptive young lady, knowledgeable about the workings of the stupid American government. She is well aware that SHIELD is the agency best equipped to cope with the sort of situation her father is in.”

“So the SHIELD agents will come storming in here—”

“Exactly,” said the Red Skull with a satisfied chuckle. “Right into my carefully laid trap, dear baron.”

“Very well,” said the baron. “You obviously know what you are about. Still, I wish she hadn’t killed Rex in making her escape.”

The crimson skull gave off an illusion of growth as the Red Skull leaned toward his minion. “I would sacrifice *human* lives to get hold of the man I am certain will come here. He will make a vain attempt to save Dr. Crandell,” he said, voice husky. “Yes, Jupiter warned me that he has been showing an interest in our activities.”

The baron cleared his throat, controlling an impulse to shudder. “You mean Captain America?”

The skull bobbed up and down. “Yes, yes. When Captain America arrives he’ll find I am well prepared for him.” He rubbed his gloved hands together. “Well prepared.”

Keep moving.

You have to keep moving.

It’s so cold.

Stop for a minute. Only a minute. Rest.

No, you must keep moving.

The lights weren’t any closer than they had been a half hour ago.

Or was that an hour?

Caroline was losing track of time.

She staggered along, the wind whipping at her slim body, the cold gnawing at her.

How long before you died?

It was so cold.

She couldn’t feel her fingers. She rubbed her dead-white palms together, thrust her hands into her armpits.

The pain that knifed up from her nearly frozen feet were awful. Her whole body ached and throbbed.

But she'd gotten away from them.

They must have found the dead dog by now, must have realized she was gone. Escaped.

So far there'd been no sound or sign of pursuit.

And she'd left the place two hours ago.

Maybe it was three.

So cold.

Time would drag along, then race forward. Like the snow swirling all around her, sometimes spinning fast and sometimes drifting slowly.

Something up ahead.

Sign on a post, crusted with snow.

Surely she could manage to trudge that far. It was very hard, though. She wanted to quit. Nothing was very important anymore, nothing except rest and warmth.

If she could rest in the snow for only a moment.

No, don't even think that!

She kept on.

It was a signpost, yes. She raised one stiff arm and brushed away at the frozen snow.

WELCOME TO MOTTSVILLE, VERMONT.

Thank God. She was in the United States, she was in a town. A nice safe American town.

BUSINESS DISTRICT 3 MILES.

Three miles yet to go? No, oh lord, she simply could not make it.

She'd have to rest.

Hugging herself, she sank to her knees in the snow beside the welcoming signpost. The night cold came closing in around her.

Fifteen

Purely by chance.

Captain America, after a day of quietly asking questions in Mottsville and the vicinity, had learned of the existence of the chalet. Built over forty years ago by a wealthy shipbuilder, the place had been unoccupied for more than a decade until a little over a year ago. Then very discreetly, purchased by a gentleman of distinctly foreign appearance. He called himself Baron Graff, and hinted that his wealth came from industrial activities in Europe. The permanent citizens of Mottsville knew little more of the baron, although some of them speculated a great deal about him. He'd installed a very large staff at the chalet, something like thirty people. Did a lot of repairs, too, but didn't hire any local workmen. Brought in his own crew, from somewhere else. That didn't sit too well with Mottsville.

Very good skiing up around the chalet. Although no one from there had ever been seen on the slopes. Only a housekeeper and a driver ever came to town. They hardly spoke, bought up large quantities of food and supplies,

always paid cash, then vanished for another few weeks. The baron himself was known to travel, maybe because of his European business. He owned a helicopter and several very somber and expensive cars.

The chalet sounded to Cap like an ideal place to store a kidnapped scientist and his daughter. He was also able to establish that two men who answered the descriptions of two thugs on Jupiter's payroll had been seen around the ski resort town at about the time Dr. Crandell had disappeared.

A visit to the baron's chalet was, therefore, in order.

Captain America waited until the small hours of the morning, until even the most enthusiastic of celebrating skiers had left the bars of the tourist inns. Slipping out of his own room in one of the smaller lodging houses, he went driving into the moderate storm.

It was purely by chance that he chose the road he did. Judging by the maps he'd consulted, there were two back roads that would bring him near the chalet for a scouting expedition. When he reached the crossroads he took the right-hand road. That made all the difference.

Even with his exceptional eyesight, he almost missed her. She was nearly covered with snow, but a patch of her blue sweater was showing and it caught his eye.

Captain America swung his car to the side of the narrow road and went diving out into the snowstorm.

The wind whirled around him as he ran to the girl's side. She was still alive. He knelt and began to clear the snow away from her chilled body. In less than a minute he was carrying her back to the car in his arms.

". . . get to . . . town," Caroline murmured. ". . . help my father . . . he's at . . . chalet . . ."

Propping her in the passenger seat of the sports car, he draped his trench coat around her. From the looks of her there was a good possibility of frostbite. He knew that the

worst thing he could do was massage her hands and feet. What he did have to do was get her to a doctor as fast as possible.

He managed to turn the car around, though it was very difficult on the dark unplowed road. He headed back for town at the fastest speed he could manage.

“. . . skull . . .” muttered the semi-conscious girl. “. . . father needs . . .”

“Easy now,” Cap said gently. “You’ll be all right soon.”

He’d recognized her at once as the missing Dr. Crandell’s daughter. From her dazed murmuring, he deduced that her father was still a prisoner at the chalet. She had somehow managed to get away.

“. . . so cold . . . going to die . . .”

“No, you’re going to live,” he assured her. “We’re going to help your father, too.”

“Help my father,” echoed Caroline before dropping into a restless sleep.

Well, he’d never seen anything quite like it.

He’d been practicing medicine here in Mottsville for more than nineteen years and had treated every kind of skiing or barroom accident you could imagine.

But Dr. Bensen had never seen a man in a red, white, and blue costume, with a chain-mail tunic and a winged cowl, come running into his reception room at four in the morning carrying a nearly frozen girl wrapped up in an oversized trench coat.

Bensen was still up because he’d just come back from delivering the Fermans’ sixth child, another girl. He was in the process of fixing himself a cup of instant coffee when his doorbell rang.

He’d hurried from the kitchen to the offices at the front of his house and there, had been greeted by the unique sight of Captain America and Caroline Crandell.

“What happened, young man?” the doctor asked.

“Exposure, doctor. Possibly frostbite, maybe worse. I don’t know how long she was out in the snow.”

“Quite a long while, from the look of her, poor kid.” He started for one of his examining rooms. “Bring her in here, put her on the table.”

Cap placed Caroline down carefully on the white-padded metal table and then stepped aside.

“Been to a party?” asked the bald doctor while washing his hands at the sink.

“No.”

“Your costume wasn’t for a party?”

“No.”

“Just wear it for fun?”

“My line of work calls for it.”

Letting that pass, Dr. Bensen quickly slipped into a white jacket and hurried to the unconscious girl’s side. “Any idea how this happened?”

“A pretty good one.”

“How’d you happen to find her?”

“Purely by chance,” answered Cap.

Sixteen

The Bulldog Bar was nowhere near Yale. It stood, or rather leaned, at the wrong end of New Haven. It was framed on one side by a sparsely stocked thriftshop and on the other by a long defunct fish market. Long, narrow, and aggressively dingy, it was hardly the place to take a lovely red-haired girl at three in the morning. Yet that was exactly what Jake Sheridan was doing. Guiding Amanda Twain up to the swayback counter, he said, “Terrific ambience, huh?”

“Yes, I think I got some of it on my shoe,” said the girl.

“I told you being on the front lines like this was going to be more than you could handle, Mandy. Maybe you better hop in your jet and—”

“Hooey,” she told him. “I’m sticking. Besides, if I left you alone in a dive like this, they’d probably roll you. Even at this ungodly hour of the morning.”

The bartender was tattooed, but not with any of the traditional designs. No snakes, anchors, or dancing girls adorned his flesh. “Picasso,” he announced to Amanda, noticing her surprised scrutiny. He spread his arms wide,

flexed his muscles, jiggled what showed of his flabby chest. “I am tattooed from head to foot with the major works of Pablo Picasso, the noted Spanish artist. Of whom you’ve no doubt heard. Most of the customers agree I add a definite touch of class to what would otherwise be a dump. Later on, when we know each other better, I might show you Picasso’s famous *Guernica.* I got it tattooed on my—”

“A.P. around?” asked Jake.

Turning his highly decorative head to study the wall clock, which extolled the virtues of a brewery that had long since gone bankrupt, the bartender replied, “He’s having breakfast.”

“When’ll he be back?”

“Oh, he’s here, but he’s having breakfast. Always does at this time or thereabouts,” explained the bartender, pointing. “Over there, in his usual spot. Booth three.”

With the girl close beside him, Jake made his way across the sawdust floor to the wooden booth. “A.P.?”

“Is somebody trying to play *This Is Your Life?”* inquired a blurred voice from deep within the ramshackle booth. “Because I definitely know that’s a voice out of my own lost and colorful past. He was a whey-faced stripling when I gave him his first big break. Little did we know that—”

“Amanda, this is A.P. Dana,” said Jake, sliding into the booth and pulling Amanda in after him.

Across the table the girl saw someone who looked like a faded photo of a once lean and handsome man. He was gaunt, pale, unshaven. His ancient suit displayed an impressive array of wrinkles. In the cracked bowl near his slightly shaking hand were about three or four ounces of dry cornflakes.

Dana studied the girl through his crusted, circle-rimmed eyes. “You’re very attractive,” he decided, “although a shade on the skinny side.”

“I was about to say the same about you,” remarked Amanda.

Dana sighed. “Feisty women, Jake. You’re always attracted to feisty women,” he said. “Be the ruin of you eventually, just as it was the ruin of me.”

“Amanda and I are not attracted to each other,” Jake explained. “Actually, we feel something more akin to a mutual loathing.”

“Well, a great many long-lasting relationships have been built on that sort of a foundation, Jake. Matter of fact, I recall that my second wife and I started off detesting each other. It grew into repulsion, and from there, it was only a short dash to the altar.” He deposited a spoonful of the dry cornflakes into his mouth, chewed them, and set the bent spoon aside. “You obviously didn’t seek me out simply to have me play Miss Lonely Hearts for you.” He paused.

“You know just about everything that’s going on, A.P.”

“True, true,” the older man agreed.

Suddenly Amanda snapped her fingers, exclaiming, “A.P. Dana! I remember you now. You won a Pulitzer back in the nineteen fifties someplace. Sure, we spent a week studying your work when I was in journalism school. You were a great reporter.”

Dana picked up the spoon, attempting to study his reflection in its less-than-polished surface. “Yes, I was good,” he admitted.

“Damn good,” said Jake. “You still are, and if you’d only quit the booze and get yourself—”

“Don’t try any tambourine and prayer-book stuff on me, Jake. Now . . . what can I do for you?”

With a resigned shrug, Jake rested his elbows on the tacky surface of the table. “There’s not much happening around here that you don’t know about, A.P.,” he said. “Because of your particular outlook on life you may not do anything

about it, but I think you must hear about every crooked deal and cheap racket in this town."

"I do have an extensive knowledge of crime and corruption," the older reporter admitted. "To most people an old deadbeat like myself seems invisible. It allows me to listen in on a good many fascinating conversations. What is it you're curious about?"

"A scientist, name of—"

"Anybody like a jelly donut?" inquired the tattooed bartender, materializing beside their booth. "Just found a couple of them back in the kitchen, look fairly new."

"We'll pass," said Amanda.

"Remind me later to roll up my sleeve and show you my elbow," said the decorated man before departing.

"A scientist named Gregory Crandell," said Jake, watching the older reporter's face. "Know anything about the guy?"

Dana tapped his yellowed front teeth with a fingernail, then began nibbling at it. "Brilliant man."

After a few seconds of silence Jake said, "What else?"

Dana straightened up somewhat. "Trouble, Jake. Leave it alone."

"What do you mean?"

"You've always been a little foolhardy, walking right into messes."

"That's what a good reporter's supposed to do, A.P. You know that. It's what gets you the big stories and the prizes and whatever satisfaction you can grab out of this lousy trade."

"True. Still—leave this one alone," advised Dana. "Go back home to that sun-drenched wonderland where you now reside. Forget this."

"Nope," Jake said. "With or without what you can tell me, I'm going to keep digging into this. There's something big

going on.”

The older reporter nodded once. “There is indeed, so big it could kill you.”

Amanda reached across the table to touch the old man’s wrinkled sleeve. “Then you do know something about what happened to Dr. Crandell? About who took him?”

“I advise you two to get married, move to Florida and look into the possibilities of opening a seashell shop.”

“C’mon, A.P.,” said Jake with impatience. “You can quit treating me as though I’m still the office boy you knew when we worked together on the *Stamford Advocate.”*

“Okay, Jake,” said Dana, poking at the cornflakes in the cracked bowl. “I’ll tell you what I’ve heard. Then it’s up to you. I’ll put you and this fetching young woman out of my mind until I come upon your obits in the press.

“The government boys haven’t learned much about the good doctor’s whereabouts, because anyone who knows anything about what happened is too terrified to talk. Most informers would blab just about anything for money, and it takes something formidable to hush them up.

“The actual snatching of Dr. Crandell was carried out by a New York area crime czar who calls himself Jupiter.”

“Syndicate man,” said Jake. “Fairly high up in the organization.”

Amanda asked, “You mean this is a syndicate job? What would they want with—”

“Oh, no, my dear,” said Dana. “Jupiter and his people were working for someone else. Someone so powerful that he can persuade the biggest hoods to do exactly what he wants.”

“What are you getting at?” asked Amanda, leaning forward. “Some super all-powerful villain who has the—”

“Easy now, Mandy,” urged Jake. “Let A.P. give us the news. Save your editorial comments for later.”

“There is,” continued Dana, “a very big plot in the making. Don’t have all the details, and haven’t tried to dig them out. I’ve grown old and, regardless of how it may look to you, I enjoy the life I lead. I don’t want to know anything more about this plot.”

Jake said, “Then someone is using Crandell’s sonic weapon.”

Dana gave a single nod.

“But,” said Amanda, “we’re talking about someone who is destroying entire cities, killing thousands and thousands of people.”

“As long as they don’t kill me, my dear, I don’t—”

“Naw, you can’t con me, A.P.,” Jake told him. “You haven’t changed that much. You aren’t going to sit here and pretend to be a colorful old drunk while somebody is shaking the world to pieces.”

The reporter didn’t reply immediately. “Okay, Jake,” he finally said. “The best I can do for you is give you what information I have and make a few suggestions about where to get more. Maybe you’ll be able, with luck, to find out where Dr. Crandell is. Going to be very tough, very risky.” He inclined his head toward the girl. “The odds are very strong you’ll both end up dead and done for.”

“We’ll take that chance,” she said.

“Okay,” said Dana. He gave them facts, names, data. When he had finished he leaned back against the worn wood, letting his eyes close slowly.

Very quietly, Jake asked, “The lad who’s behind all this, do you have any idea who he is?”

“Yes,” replied Dana, not opening his eyes. His answer was barely whispered. “The Red Skull.”

Seventeen

The dawn was thick and gray; the snowstorm was worsening. Big flakes fell hard and fast around the Snow Hills lodge. Only glowing embers remained in the deep fireplace. The lobby was dim and silent, with scents of last night's festivities lingering in the air. A lone figure came quietly down the back stairway, crossed the deserted lobby and slipped into a phone booth. Closing himself into the cubicle, he dialed a secret number.

His call was answered on the second ring by a subdued voice. *"Ja?"*

The man in the booth identified himself, using a combination of words and numbers.

The man on the other end asked, "Status of your report?"

"Priority One."

An audible swallowing. "Then you wish to speak to . . ."

"Yes, I must."

"Very well. Stand by."

A gust of wind came swooping down the fireplace chimney, making the dregs of the fire sparkle orange.

“Very well. What do you have to report?” rasped a voice from the chalet.

Unconsciously, the man in the booth straightened, almost coming to attention. “Sir, he has arrived here.”

“Gut. Exactly as I anticipated. Where is he?”

“He found the girl, brought her here to town, to a doctor.”

The metallic laugh shook the earpiece of the phone. “Marvelous! This is going even better than I had planned. I thought it would take longer to lure him here. That is what the girl was meant to do. You have given me good news indeed.”

“Yes, *mein Herr.”*

“The girl will no doubt tell Captain America where her father is being held. Then my hated foe will make an attempt to save the professor.”

“He is still with the girl, at the doctor’s house.”

“Captain America won’t stay there much longer. I know him; he’s a very impatient and impulsive man. We can expect him here soon.” Another unsettling laugh. “We will be ready for him.”

“I have to.”

“No, what you have to do is remain here. You’re in no condition to—”

“But my father. I have to help you—”

“No.” Captain America put his gloved hand on the girl’s shoulder. “At the risk of stating the obvious, Caroline,” he said, “let me point out that you’ve been through a very rough night. You trekked miles in a near blizzard, after having been attacked by a vicious guard dog. You nearly froze, and it’s a miracle that your frostbite isn’t any worse.

Dr. Bensen says that unless you get a lot of rest right now you're running the risk of lots more complications."

"So long as my father's a prisoner there, I don't care what —"

"Trust me, Caroline. Let me run the risks."

She looked into his tanned face, into the determined blue eyes behind the mask. "It's just . . . I don't want to let him down . . ."

"You've done more than most people would have," he told her. "I'll take over from here."

She sank back against the pillows of the narrow bed in the small spare bedroom. It was a simple room, but to the girl it seemed a great deal more pleasant than almost any room she'd ever been in. "Okay," she said. "I know something about you. If anyone can save my father from . . . from that murderous crew at the chalet . . . it's you."

"Any idea who's running the operation?"

"Yes," she replied. "I . . . I've never seen him . . . but my father has . . . many times. He's . . . a terrible man. They call him . . . the Red Skull."

Cap's fingers tightened on her shoulder. "Yes, that's who I thought was behind this business," he said grimly.

"You know him then?"

A bitter smile touched Captain America's lips. "All too well, Caroline," he said. "He and I have been opponents many times over the years. He's the most ruthless man I've ever met. Yet he's clever. There've been times when I was sure I'd defeated him, even times when I was convinced he was dead. He always manages to come back, to strike again."

"He . . . from what I could learn from my father . . . the Red Skull is planning something truly terrible this time," she said. "You do know what sort of weapons my father has been working on, don't you?"

“Yes. Those weapons, Caroline, have been used over the last few months to destroy entire cities.”

The girl raised a hand to her face and pressed her fingertips into her cheekbone. “My fault in a way,” she said, on the edge of tears. “All that death and ruin. Father let that man use him . . . because he was afraid for me. I told him it didn’t matter, that we shouldn’t let those weapons be used.” She shook her head from side to side. “I don’t know . . . I wish he hadn’t even developed them at all. There doesn’t seem to be any decent way to employ weapons like that.”

“It’s better a man like your father unlocked such secrets, Caroline, than a man like the Red Skull.”

“Yes, but now the Red Skull has control of them anyway. He’s going to . . . I’m afraid . . . he’s going to keep on destroying and destroying,” she said. “Not cities . . . but whole countries. Until he establishes control over the entire world.”

“The same old dream,” observed Cap. “The one he inherited from his old mentor, Adolf Hitler.”

“If Hitler had had weapons like the ones my father has invented I don’t think anyone could have stopped him.”

Captain America’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll stop the Red Skull. Don’t you worry.” He bent his head closer to hers. “Now tell me everything you can remember about the chalet and the people in it.”

Eighteen

Nick Fury gritted his teeth as the gigantic robot came charging at him.

The murderous-looking mechanism was almost eight feet high, and it was equipped with four long metal arms. Two of the arms ended in powerful fists, one had a pistol instead of fingers, and the fourth was tipped with a gleaming six-inch blade.

The robot lunged at Fury with the knife arm, moving with impressive agility.

But Fury moved faster. Pivoting clear of the charge, he got a grip on the robot's arm and levered the mechanism into the nearest wall. "How ya like that, ya bag of bolts?"

The robot smacked the wall with an impressive *wham.* Scant seconds later, though, it had regained its balance and was galloping at him. Its pistol arm swung upward.

Fury ducked and the shot missed his grizzled head by inches. The SHIELD chief went charging into the robot, using his skull as a battering ram.

The robot slid backward.

Fury closed in on it, caught hold of another of its arms, and swung the thing into the wall again. “Want more, ya tin-plated jerk?”

The robot started whirling around, all four of its metal arms stretched out rigidly. It came flying at Fury like a buzzsaw on legs.

Three feet away from him, it stopped dead.

“Huh?” Fury’s lone eye blinked.

“Hate to interrupt you when you’re exercising, Nick,” said the lean black girl who came into the SHIELD gymnasium, “except there’s an important message waiting for you.”

“Something happen to Cap?”

“This isn’t about Captain America, but it’s related to what he’s working on.”

Grabbing up a towel, Fury swabbed his face and the back of his thick neck. Then he picked up the cigar butt he’d left balanced on one of the exercise bars. “Okay, Velma, let’s go back to work.”

Starting for the doorway, Velma said, “You’re defeating the purpose of a workout with those vile cigars.”

“Nuts! My Uncle Rollo smoked fourteen stogies a day from the time he was three. The old geezer didn’t kick off until he was one hundred and six years old.”

“Rollo Fury? Never heard of him.”

“He mighta made it into the record books as the oldest guy alive if he hadn’t gone on a health-food kick. After he quit smoking, he died in less than three months from an overdose of carrots.” Fury blew smoke out through his flattened nose.

The girl led him to one of their communications rooms. “You can take it on talkscreen six, Nick.”

“Thanks, kid.” He strode quickly across the large metal-walled room and dropped into a chair facing one of the

screens in the wall. “It’s yer nickel, buddy. Blab away.”

A young, crew-cut SHIELD agent showed on the screen. “Picked up something interesting in New Haven, Nick.”

“Hope it ain’t a social disease, Braff.”

“Seriously, Nick. I feel stupid about not having unearthed this a lot earlier.”

“Feel stupid on yer own time, Braff. Just give me the poop.”

“There have been a couple of investigative reporters here in New Haven, digging into the disappearance of Dr. Crandell.”

“What sheet they with?”

“They’re with *Newsmag,”* answered Braff. “Point is, Nick, I got alerted to their arrival and decided to tag along in their wake. They came up with some sources we missed.”

“What the heck’s wrong with you birds, letting a couple saps from a cheesy rag like that scoop you?”

“It is disheartening,” admitted Braff. “At any rate, they were able to dig up the fact that Crandell, and possibly his daughter, were very likely taken to Vermont. Somewhere near a town named—”

“Mottsville,” growled Fury, exhaling smoke.

“Mottsville, yes. How’d you know?”

“I read it in my gosh darn tea leaves!” He was already pushing back in his chair. “Okay, Braff, thanks. See if you can shape up a little. Bye.”

“Listen, I didn’t do such a bad job of—”

Fury didn’t hear the rest of it. He was already out of the room, stomping along the corridor and bellowing, “Get the helicarrier ready, gang! We’re gonna give Captain America a little support.”

Nineteen

Captain America came gliding down the steeply slanting hillside, cutting through the heavy snow. An expert skier, he moved swiftly down across the snowy slope that led to the woods at the back of the chalet.

In the distance now he could just make out its rooftops, the chimneys sending up streamers of sooty smoke which were torn to shreds by the storm winds. Dr. Crandell was in that house. And so was the Red Skull.

A grim smile touched Cap’s face as he thought of his longtime enemy. He’d first encountered the Red Skull decades ago, very soon after Dr. Erskine had been killed. He and that scarlet scourge had been battling ever since.

For a time, though, both he and the rest of the world had believed the Skull was dead.

. . . it had been near the end of the Second World War. The Nazi regime was in its final days; Berlin was crumbling under the Allied bombing.

And beneath that collapsing city, deep in a hidden Nazi bunker, Captain America and the Red Skull were locked in hand-to-hand combat.

Cap had trailed his foe to the hideout and engaged him in a brutal all-out fight—and both of them were aware that it was a battle to the death. Always a formidable opponent, on that day the Skull had fought with even more amazing strength than usual. The contest pounded on and on, one staggering punch followed by another. Yet both men kept at it.

Often, in later years, Captain America had reflected on that conflict beneath the streets of war-torn Berlin. He was fairly certain he would have won, and yet . . .

But it was destined to be a fight without a decision. For suddenly a blockbuster came screaming down to explode with earth-shattering force directly above the hidden bunker. The roof collapsed. Beams, block of concrete, twists of metal, sputtering wires—it all came raining down.

Captain America was knocked completely across the room and thrown into what was left of a corridor. When he looked back, there was only a huge mound of smoldering debris where the Skull had been.

It didn’t seem possible that he could have survived. So Captain America worked his way out of there and made it to the ruined street above.

But inside the bunker some rather unusual canisters had been smashed—they contained an experimental gas, a gas designed to induce a deep hypnosis. And now the chemical came seeping out of them, sweeping through the rubble. There, where two shattered roof beams had formed an arch over the Red Skull, saving him from being crushed, the gas gradually filled his dazed lungs. It flowed through his system, and it had a strange effect on him.

The gas put the Red Skull to sleep, into a state of suspended animation. His breathing and his heartbeat slowed down to an incredible pace. Yet he lived. Buried beneath the street, he lived on and on, year after year, while a new Berlin grew up over him. The new Germany was trying to turn its back on the past, on Hitler and the concentration camps and the Third Reich.

There were some men, however, who didn't want to forget. After a time these men began to hear rumors that the infamous Red Skull had survived. And then they proved the rumors to be true, for they searched and found the Skull.

Carefully, they excavated at the site of the old bunker, working, under the cover of night, like archaeologists seeking to find the lost treasures of the past. They unearthed the body and discovered that the Red Skull's heart was still beating. They revived him, and set him lose once more in an unsuspecting world.

Like a disease everyone believed had been wiped out, he returned to surprise nations, to plague his enemies, to kill again, to waste and destroy . . .

Maybe this time, though, thought Captain America as he whizzed closer to the chalet, *I'll succeed in destroying him for good and all.*

His skis carried him to the forest behind the Red Skull's stronghold. Expertly he made his way over the snow between the straight-standing trees.

Then he realized he was no longer alone.

Three dark figures were hissing after him across the snow.

Cap sensed at once that they were minions of the Red Skull.

And when the lead skier produced a pistol and fired at him, his suspicion was confirmed.

The slug thunked into a tree trunk a few feet ahead of him. Lumps of crusty snow came flickering down off the branches.

Only the most experienced of skiers could do what Captain America attempted next. Zigzagging deftly around the sturdy trees, he twisted around on his skis until he half faced his trio of pursuers. Then he used his red, white, and blue shield to ward off the pistol shots that came zinging at him.

Perhaps inspired by the ease with which Cap skied around obstacles, or by the way his colleague could handle his pistol, another of the Skull's guards began to try to shoot at Cap. He tugged out his .45 automatic from beneath his parka and aimed it.

He was not, however, quite deft enough. Ten seconds after producing the gun he smashed right into a wide tree trunk.

That left two men still on Cap's trail.

Captain America now did something even more unexpected—he tensed, leaped up in the air and caught at a low-hanging branch. Kicking off his skis, he went spinning upward until he was standing on the branch, then he unslung his shield and sent it zipping down.

It cut through the storm, connected with the throat of the foremost skier, and sent him cartwheeling off across the snow.

The man behind couldn't stop in time. His skies hit the spread-eagled body of his cohort. Yelling, he flipped over and landed in a great whoosh of snow.

Cap was on the ground an instant later. He stood wide-legged beside the two sprawled men. Retrieving his shield, he scrutinzed the pair.

"Both out cold," he said aloud. "Wonder if they're always on guard or if the Red Skull is expecting me."

"Oh, yes," said a voice behind him, "I'm expecting you."

Twenty

The Red Skull was not alone.

Standing in front of him, clad only in the nightdress the doctor had loaned her, was Caroline. The Skull was using her as a shield, and he held one of her arms twisted up behind her slim back. In his other gloved hand was a pistol that was pressed to her temple.

The girl was sobbing and shaking uncontrollably.

“Damn you!” said Captain America.

The Red Skull laughed. “Won’t you ever learn?” he said. “So eager to rush here to save the noble Dr. Crandell, you leave this frail young creature alone with a feeble old physician.”

“What did you—”

“You never even realized, my dear champion of democracy, that I only allowed her to escape so she might tell you I was here. You see, I *wanted* you here.”

“Now you’ve got me, Skull! And I’m going to—”

“You’re going to do nothing at all,” mocked the Red Skull.

Caroline was sobbing more violently now. “Let me . . . go . . .”

Glancing from side to side, Cap saw that many men were approaching through the stormy woods. “Let the girl go,” he said. “Face me man to man.”

The Skull increased the pressure on the girl’s arm, and she cried out in pain. He chuckled. “Don’t you yet realize,” he rasped, “that there is absolutely no sense in fighting fair.”

“You rotten—”

Then they were upon him. Six of them, and then six more.

Even for Captain America, the odds were too great. He fell down and succumbed to their blows.

Red death.

He saw a thousand faces of death, spinning around him, all blazing crimson.

Captain America came more fully awake, attempting to sit up.

A gust of roaring flame shot past him, ripping across his cheek.

He fell back to the floor of the cell he’d awakened in.

About two feet above him was a jet of flaming gas. It sent out a stripe of fire that reached all the way across the narrow metal room.

And it was not the only one. There were six more ribbons of searing flame cutting across the room at various intervals. Above those, two feet higher up the wall, were six more.

These jets of flame were so spaced that if he stood up at all, his body would be lashed with fire. He was inside a giant incinerator.

Stretched out on the metal floor as he was, he couldn’t be touched by the crackling spears of flame. But neither could

he remain in that position much longer. Already the metal plates underneath him were growing hot. And the air swirling around him was like a desert wind.

He moved, inching along on his back.

The metal floor was growing hotter and hotter. He was perspiring profusely, and every breath of the superheated air was rasping at his lungs.

The Red Skull had infinite ways to destroy you. Outside, in the snowy woods, Caroline had nearly frozen to death. In here, Cap knew he'd soon be barbecued.

He had to continue snaking along on his back. If he remained still, the heat of the metal floor would burn him.

He worked his way toward a wall. Sweat was pouring down his face now, and the hot air of the cell was unbearable.

When he was directly beneath one of the fire-spewing jets, he shifted over on his side. He felt the flames go shooting over him. Bringing his knees up carefully, he was able to tug off one of his scarlet boots.

When his bare foot touched the floor there was a hissing sound, and a large blister formed on his skin.

Grimacing, Cap undid his belt. His head was throbbing now, his skin ached, the perspiration was running into his eyes.

He swung up the boot and capped the gas jet with it. His fingers were scorched, but he managed to hold the boot over the flame nozzle. Swiftly, he wrapped the belt around his makeshift plug. It held.

There was now a space in which to stand.

Gingerly Captain America arose, staying close to the wall. There was a narrow fire-free corridor. He backed along it, hopping on his injured foot, until he was as far from the blocked jet as he could get.

Kneeling, he tucked his head into his arms.

The floor was so hot it produced continual pain. He had to fight to breathe, for the air burned at his throat.

Captain America's boot was made of an exceptionally tough synthetic that couldn't burn. Now, as it corked the flow of gas, Cap knew that the pressure would build and build. The gas had to go someplace and finally—

Wham!

On the other side of the room, the pipe exploded, blowing a large jagged hole clean through the cell wall.

There was a room beyond it.

Running, Cap dived through the new-made hole. He found himself in another metal room, its floor lined with pipes and conduits.

Across the room was a door.

He went through that and into a long metal corridor.

Two men in coveralls were running toward him.

"That's what the explosion was!"

"Ja, the American swine—"

The guard got no further.

Cap had run to meet him and had delivered two smashing blows to his midsection. The follow-up punch to the jaw sent him sprawling and spread him out on the metal floor.

The second guard was reaching for his gun. Or rather, intending to reach for it.

Instead he found his gun arm twisted painfully up behind his back.

"Where's the girl?" demanded Cap.

"Ow . . . ow . . ."

"The girl?"

"On the next level," groaned the man. "In cell twenty-six."

"Thanks." Cap dealt him a chopping blow to the neck.

When the unconscious guard hit the deck. Captain America was already running along the corridor.

He went through a door, up a winding metal staircase and through a second door.

“Mein Gott!” A guard on the new level came around a bend and saw him.

But Cap didn’t stop.

And the guard never got to use his gun. Two sharp blows to the stomach doubled him up; then he was thrown against the wall. He hit it with an echoing metallic smack and passed out.

Another man appeared. This fellow had apparently been assigned the job of putting Cap’s shield in a safe place, for he was strolling along with it tucked under his arm.

He next got the novel, but ill-advised, notion of using the red, white, and blue disc against its owner. Grunting, his eyes narrowing, he flung it awkwardly.

“Thanks,” Cap said as he caught the weapon, in midair. He threw it expertly back. “Pay attention, this is how you really do it.”

The shield smashed into the guard’s chest with sufficient force to send him reeling back against a cell door.

As he bounced off that, Cap met him with several punches.

Cap fished a ring of keys from the unconscious man’s pocket.

There was one labeled twenty-six and, sure enough, it opened the door to cell twenty-six.

Caroline was in there, clad now in a tan shirt and a loose pair of khaki trousers. She was huddled on a low cot, hugging herself and crying softly. “What are . . . oh . . . Captain America!”

“Know where they have your dad?”

“Something’s about to happen,” she said, her voice faint. “The Skull has him upstairs.” She pointed at the ceiling.

He crossed the cell in a few strides, scooping the girl up in his powerful arms. “We’ll see what we can do about rescuing him,” he said, heading for the open doorway. “First, though, I’ll see to it you get out of here.”

“Please, stop putting me first. You’ve got to save him now. We may not get another—”

The floor jumped.

The walls shook.

An enormous rattling commenced.

“The sonic gun!” cried the girl in Captain America’s arms. “They’re going to use it . . . on us!”

Twenty-One

“In my own way,” said Jake Sheridan, as he guided the rented Datsun around a treacherous curve of the road, “I’m as gifted as you are, Mandy. I pilot this buggy pretty deftly.”

The auburn-haired girl sat in the passenger seat, her hands clenched nervously in her lap. “Wish I could have landed closer to Mottsville,” she said. “Feels like we’re in a toboggan race.”

“Twenty-five miles in a blizzard,” he said. “Something to tell your grandchildren about.”

“Think I’ll keep quiet about it until then.”

The heavy-falling snow was pelting the windshield, and the wipers moaned as they fought against it. The road to the resort town was like an endlessly climbing and dipping roller coaster route.

“Mottsvile five miles,” Jake read off a snow-smeared road sign. “We’re pressing ever closer.”

The girl said, “Do you think maybe we should have alerted somebody?”

“Nope.”

“This Red Skull outfit sounds even tougher than the Mafia,” Amanda said.

“We don’t have any hard evidence to take to anybody yet, Mandy. We got nothing but hearsay,” he reminded her. “Once we establish that Dr. Crandell is being held in this town, then we can—”

“In order to establish that, Jake, we may get killed. I saw real fear in the eyes of the people we finally persuaded to talk.”

“Nobody said the Red Skull was a pussycat. In our line of work, though, you have to take chances.”

“I’d rather take chances after the FBI has gone in and done a little initial tangling with these guys.”

“If we bring in the FBI now we don’t have an exclusive story anymore.”

“You’ve watched too many old *Front Page*-type flicks on the late show, Jake. You think every reporter has to—”

“Aren’t you, correct me if I’m wrong, the lass who just now piloted a jet through a snowstorm to get us here?”

“That’s different,” Amanda responded. “Battling the elements I understand. Going up against a fellow who has a scarlet skull instead of a head, that’s something else again.”

“Halloween stuff.”

“A lot nastier than that.”

Squinting, Jake rubbed the heel of his hand over the fogged inner surface of the glass. “Mottsville two miles. Closer, ever closer.”

The car quivered in a huge gust of wind, lost traction and suddenly started to fly off the road toward a drift of snow.

“Jake!” the girl clutched at his arm.

Gently, Jake turned the steering wheel and brought the machine back on the proper course. “It’s okay, we’re back on an even keel.”

Amanda relaxed in her seat. “That *was* deftly done.”

He glanced over at her. “You know, Mandy, I have the feeling you’re not simply concerned about yourself,” he said. “Could it be that you actually care about my well-being too?”

“Hooey.”

“Maybe, underneath your loathing lies a real and genuine affection.”

“Unlikely.” She gazed out the side window at the raging storm. “I’m no more concerned about you than you are about me.”

After a while he said, “Oh, so?”

Buildings were showing up in the snowy afternoon. Small cabins, a motel, a modest ski lodge or two. The ski lifts farther on hung still, and the slopes were empty. The storm was too severe for any recreation.

“This is the place,” said Amanda.

“Okay, we’ll check in at one of the posher inns and—”

The trees and the buildings started to shake. Snow was dropping down off branches and rooftops in great white chunks.

“Jake, what is it?”

He swung the car to the side of the road and killed the engine. “I’m afraid we got here just in time for a quake.”

Twenty-Two

“Cripes, ya ain’t gonna let a little storm scare ya off?” boomed Nick Fury. He was pacing the control room of the giant helicarrier, surrounded by a cloud of acrid cigar smoke.

The immense craft, built from an exclusive SHIELD design, was traveling rapidly toward Mottsville, Vermont, its enormous rotor blades chopping at the snow-laden air.

The pilot and copilot were hunched over their controls.

“This is awful rough weather,” said the copilot.

“So tell me somethin’ I don’t know, pal.”

“Even a supership like this one,” explained the copilot, “may not be able to withstand—”

“G’wan, don’t be such a Nervous Nellie,” Fury admonished. “There ain’t another ship in the world like this crate. We’re made outa the strongest alloy ever dreamed up.”

“Even so,” persisted the copilot, “this storm is giving us one hell of a—”

The helicarrier dipped, rose, then dipped more violently.

Fury was tossed against a bulkhead. “Geeze, go easy on them potholes, fellas!” He bent down to retrieve his smoldering stogie. Puffing it back to life, he said, “Anyway, we ain’t that far from Mottsville, are we?”

“We should be over the town in another six or seven minutes,” said the pilot.

“Okay, we oughta be able to stay aloft that long.”

The ship took another tremendous dip.

“Nick, something’s up.” A blonde girl in a SHIELD jumpsuit made her way into the control cabin.

“What, Sharon?”

“Our scanners are picking up some odd stuff from that ski town.”

Fury’s single eye went wide. “Gimme a frinstance, kiddo.”

“Come along to Data Two and see for yourself,” the girl invited. “We’re not certain, but it looks as though they’re having a severe earthquake down there.”

“Kee-rist!” said Fury.

Captain America held the girl tightly in his arms. “Hold on now, Caroline.”

“Shouldn’t we look for my—”

“No time. This whole place is about ready to topple!”

The chalet was shaking, bouncing, groaning. With the girl held close to him, Cap took a running jump at the window on the ground floor. There wasn’t enough time to get to the front door.

They went through like a human cannonball. Glass went splashing in every direction, and the shards mixed with snowflakes as they fell to the ground.

Cap landed on his feet and started running, still carrying the girl.

“Open ground doesn’t seem as bad,” he told her. “If we can get clear of the buildings and the trees we may have a chance.”

She was gazing up into the sky and the snow slapped brutally at her face. “Up there, that helicopter. They must be up there.”

Following her line of vision, Cap saw a black aircraft rising up into the storm. A panel in its belly was open. “The Skull must have the sonic guns up there.”

“To kill us, he’s willing to destroy his own people,” said Caroline. “And the whole town of Mottsville as well.”

You could see the town in the distance, and its buildings were starting to sway.

Captain America was rarely pessimistic. But just now, as he stared up at the Red Skull’s ship, he felt a tremendous wave of helplessness. The ruthless Skull was going to kill just about everyone for miles around—and Cap couldn’t stop him.

A tremendous cracking sound started up suddenly, as though a giant were pulling immense nails out of a mammoth board. There were screams, too, and cries of pain and fright.

“The chalet,” said the girl.

It was falling to pieces. Great slabs of the roof came knifing down, the sturdy walls cracked and crumbled, the windows exploded into kaleidoscopes of glass.

Captain America kept right on running along the wide gravel driveway, away from the falling house.

Now the trees were toppling over like ten pins, whooshing down to slap the white ground and send up geysers of snow.

“We’ll die,” gasped Caroline.

“Not yet,” he promised.

He covered ground at an incredible speed, and gave an impressive display of broken-field running. Dodging falling trees, and crashing debris, he made certain that he and the girl were always in the clear.

The Skull’s ship remained in the air, partially masked by the swirling snow.

Then there was another shape in the gray sky. Bigger, darker.

Cap looked up. “That’s Nick Fury,” he announced, grinning.

The Red Skull had come to the same conclusion. His craft suddenly shot forward and moved out of sight.

The SHIELD helicarrier didn’t pursue. Instead it came dropping down toward Captain America and the girl.

There were loudspeakers mounted on the underside of the huge, unique machine. Out of these came Nick Fury’s voice. “Hey, ya want a lift?”

Twenty-Three

Plumes of smoke came spinning out of Nick Fury's nostrils. "I coulda tailed that chopper," he growled, "and nabbed the flappin' Red Skull." He pointed a stubby finger at Captain America. "Instead, bein' a goldang humanitarian at heart, I stop an' pull your cookies outa the fire."

Cap was seated in the executive chamber of the helicarrier. "There might still be time—"

"Naw, forget it! We couldn't find a trace of the dang contraption."

"I could have gotten the Crandell girl to safety on my own, Nick."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," boomed Fury. "But when I saw ya stuck out there in the snow an' trees droppin' down all round ya . . . well, my sentimental side got the best of me."

Grinning, Captain America said, "I've known you a good many years, Nick. First I ever heard of your having any feelings."

"Nell's bells! Ya happen to be a good buddy of mine," Fury told him loudly. "I couldn't let ya an' the chick get swallowed

up.”

The SHIELD helicarrier had set down near the heart of Mottsville. The Skull’s hurried departure had aborted the quake he’d initiated, but a great deal of damage had already been done. Fury had sent out a crew of SHIELD paramedics to aid the dozens of injured. There was also a SHIELD crew looking after the fires and explosions the quake had triggered. The storm was abating, but civil rescue teams were still having a difficult time reaching the injured town on the snow-blocked roads. Until outside help did get through, Nick Fury was going to stick around.

“You’re also helping out the townspeople,” Cap pointed out.

“I gotta do that. That’s how ya can tell I’m a good guy an’ not a rat.” Fury, trailing smoke, stalked over to a wall that was covered with TV monitor screens. He jabbed a thumb at one of them. “My number six cam is pickin’ up what’s left of that flappin’ chalet. Now maybe, old buddy, if we sifted through the rubble, we might find some info that’d tell us where the heck he took Doc Crandell.”

Captain America shook his star-spangled head. “The Red Skull is efficient. He wouldn’t leave anything behind, once he’d made up his mind to total the chalet.”

“Did ya learn anything while ya were the Skull’s guest?”

Cap said, “Only that he never runs out of ingenious ways to try to do me in.”

“Ya knew that goin’ in,” snorted Fury. He began to pace. “The rat’s got Crandell’s sonic weapon, he’s usin’ it. We got to stop the guy!” He took several angry puffs on his cigar. “Okay, so where’d he go? Where’d he haul the doc off to?”

“The Red Skull has more than one secret hideaway, Nick. He could be heading just about anywhere.”

“If only . . .” Fury snapped his fingers. “The girl! Sure, his daughter was in that dump for weeks. She musta learned

somethin'!"

Captain America stood. "She's been through a lot, Nick. We can't expect—"

"Whadda ya mean?" Fury came striding toward him, scowling. "Ain't ya the one who's all the time talkin' about what a great country we got an' how we got to fight to protect it? Okay, buster, the Red Skull just gave us a little demonstration. If we hadn't arrived when we did, Mottsville woulda been leveled. He can do that to any city in the U.S.A. Detroit, New York, Philly, Frisco—he can shake 'em all down. Unless, old buddy, we stop him damn quick!"

"You're right, Nick."

"Bet your duffy I am," agreed Fury. "Okay, I know the kid's been through a lot. Still we just got to question her . . . right now."

"She may not know anything. I don't think she ever even saw the Skull."

Fury said, "Maybe she don't think she remembers anything, but we can always haul her into the ESP chamber."

"That could be rough on her," said Captain America.

"It could," agreed Nick.

No more snow falling. A clear, crisp night sky spotted with stars. A crescent moon showing above whatever treetops still remained.

"Moonlight, a chalet, a winter wonderland," remarked Jake Sheridan. "Didn't I tell you we'd hit all sort of romantic spots if we stuck together, Mandy?"

Amanda Twain let her flashlight beam play on the ruins of the Red Skull's abandoned chalet. "Not a bad location, but the house needs a little work."

Jake, his own light shining as they approached the chalet, said, “Our timing was off. A couple hours the other way and we’d have been here when this edifice was still extant.”

“It would have had the Red Skull inside it then,” the girl reminded him.

“You know, everybody wants to be a celebrity these days. Magazines like ours and *People* encourage that,” said Jake. “Maybe I should just ask the Skull if he’d give me an interview. We could promise him the cover.”

“Have to find him first, Jake. He has, to use a phrase that often turns up in your pieces, flown the coop.”

“No, when I use that cliché, I brighten it up by saying, ‘He’s flown the proverbial coop.’ ” Stopping at the foot of what had once been the front staircase to the building, he pointed back the way they had come. “I don’t think SHIELD knows where he went either.”

“The fact that they’re here, though, proves that this is something big.”

“I told you that back in L.A., Mandy.”

“So now I believe you,” she said. “Of course, seeing half the town come crashing down around our ears helped convince me, too.”

“That’s ‘come crashing down around our proverbial ears.’ ” Jake paused and frowned, rubbing a knuckle across his chin. “Nick Fury *and* Captain America working on this caper. Yeah, we got us one of the biggest yarns of our respective careers.”

“But it’s not going to be exclusive much longer. Lots of our media colleagues are going to be hitting town any time now.”

“First time the mystery quakes have hit so close to home. Sure, that’s news,” he said. “But we have a hell of a head start. And we aren’t going to lose it.”

“Okay, what’s our next step?”

“We start poking around in this chalet, making like Sherlock Holmes and Nick Carter,” said Jake. “Because in order to track this thing to a finish, we need us a clue.”

“We’ve got an awful big area to dig through, Jake.”

“All we need is one little clue.”

She nodded, smiling. “Going to be like looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack.”

Twenty-Four

“Yes, I want to.”

“Going to be a strain on you, Caroline, and—”

“Hey, let’s can the gab, huh? She’s already agreed ta do it, Cap.”

“I can stand whatever I have to. Since I can’t consciously recall anything to help you find my father, then I think I’d better try this.”

“Terrific! Lemme escort ya to the ESP chamber, kiddo.”

A vast room, several stories high, packed with huge, complex mechanisms and computers. Most of the machinery was so advanced that your average scientist had hardly begun to dream of it, much less invent it.

Wearing a borrowed SHIELD jumpsuit, Caroline Crandell made her way across the glossy noryl plastic flooring.

“Bet ya never seen nothing like this,” said Fury, his cigar upthrust in a confident manner.

“No, I haven’t.”

With Cap’s help, Caroline sat down in a padded metal chair. The chair was rigged up, in myriad ways, to an enormous machine behind her and also to a compact computer. Her pretty face was very pale now, and there were sooty shadows underlining her cheekbones and sad eyes.

Indicating the machines, the computer, and the bustling lab techs, Fury boomed, “What we got here is a gizmo that allows us to tap in on what ya got hidden in your noggin, see? Now when we quizzed ya earlier ya said ya couldn’t remember nothin’. That’s what you think, kid. In yer brain is everything ya ever heard or saw. What we can do here in the ESP chamber is dig what we want outta yer subconscious.”

A faint blush touched the girl’s cheeks. “There are some things I’d rather—”

“Don’t panic, sweetheart. We can direct our probe, get right at the stuff that pertains to what we’re after. Anything else stays strictly confidential.”

“I’ve seen this work before,” said Cap while he helped Nick attach various straps and electrodes to the girl. “It’s relatively painless, Caroline, and pretty effective.”

“Okay. I’ll try anything that’ll help save my father.”

Several white-clad technicians had converged on the area. At a nod from the smoking Fury they began to twist dials, flip switches, nudge toggles. Lights lit up all over the polished face of the central machine, and the computer began making a low, purring hum. Everything clicked, clattered, whirred, chattered.

A bearded young man in a spotless white jumpsuit approached Fury. “We’re ready to roll, Nick.”

“What ya do now,” Fury told the girl, “is shut yer peepers an’ relax. It’s gonna feel almost like yer asleep.”

Caroline let her eyes shut. “Yes, I do feel . . . drowsy . . .”

“I’m gonna start askin’ ya questions. You don’t answer ’em with yer voice. The machine’s gonna find out and tell us.”

“You mean you’ll get a printout of my thoughts?” she asked in a sleepy voice.

“Better than that. It’s gonna talk to us, ain’t it, Meech?”

The bearded young man nodded. “Right, Nick.”

Fury shifted his stogie from one side of his mouth to the other, leaning close to the docile girl. “When ya was there in the chalet, kid . . . ya musta heard some of the Skull’s flunkies gabbin’. You don’t consciously remember, but I’m bettin’ ya got some info stashed in your cabeza. Gimme a name or a fact or anythin’.”

“Klise,” said a metallic voice. It came out of a speaker grid that was dangling above the dozing girl’s head.

“What’s Klise?”

“He’s . . . Texas . . .”

“What else?”

“. . . nothing . . .”

“C’mon! Ya must know more.”

The girl shifted in her chair, moaning faintly.

“. . . one night . . . they talked . . . outside room where I had dinner sometimes . . . didn’t know I was there . . . Klise is . . . important man to them . . . he’s going to cooperate . . . satellite . . . important . . . Fourth Reich . . .”

Meech interrupted. “Just got something out of data backup, Nick.” He waved a sheet of flimsy paper. “A Herman Klise lives in Houston, Texas, and he’s chairman of the board of a very big outfit called Texon Telecom Industries. Klise is noted for his extreme—even for Texas—right-wing political views. He’s funded some neo-fascist groups over the last few years. The U.S. government isn’t too fond of him, but

because of the excellence of the Texon satellite components, they have to deal with him.”

“Why’s Klise tied in with the Skull?” mused Fury.

Captain America said, “Sonic weapons mounted in a satellite would give the Red Skull the opportunity to destroy any place on the globe.”

“Nell’s bells! Ya gotta be right, Cap.” He took a few thoughtful puffs of his cigar, then addressed himself again to the girl. “Anything else? Any little but of scuttlebutt ya mighta overheard, kid?”

The girl stirred in the chair like a child in a troubled sleep.

“Kesselring . . . Kesselring will see to the tech . . . supplies . . . ship to . . . island . . . Kesselring can get whatever components . . . island . . .”

“What island?”

“. . . sleep . . . I was asleep and they were talking in the corridor . . . about Kesselring . . . components . . . so dim . . . the island . . .”

In the chair Caroline’s eyes drifted open. *“I feel very . . .”* She slumped, her body pressing against the various restraints.

“That better be all for this session,” said Cap.

“Yeah, but—”

“He’s right, Nick,” said Meech. “There’s a tremendous stress factor involved in using the ESP gear. On top of which, this young woman is already in a weakened condition.”

“Okay, okay, unhook her.”

Captain America saw to that; then he lifted the unconscious girl into his arms. “I’ll take her back to her quarters. Send one of your medics to look after her,” he said. “When I get back, Nick, we can talk. I happen to know who Kesselring is.”

“So who?”

“A shady electronics wizard who’s holed up in Spain at the moment.” Cap started for the exit. “He must be supplying the Skull with what he needs to build his sonic weapons.”

“Okay, but what about the dang island? Where’s that?”

“We’ll have to ask Kesselring.”

Twenty-Five

From the veranda you saw, at first, only the luxuriant tropical foliage, the tall palm trees gently swaying in a warm breeze, a wide stretch of yellow beach glowing in the sunlight, and the calm blue Pacific beyond. A more careful scrutiny revealed that a good deal of the greenery was camouflage, masking complex gun and missile installations. The golden sand covered bunkers, and off among the palm trees stood barracks which were disguised to suggest a thick jungle.

“A highly trained army of two thousand men,” said the Red Skull, gesturing toward the hidden barracks with one gloved hand. “Drilled to perfection, each man believing passionately in our ideals.”

“I didn’t realize,” said the gaunt Dr. Crandell, who was slouched in a wicker chair, “that you had anything resembling an ideal.”

The Skull laughed. “I believe in power, Herr doctor, in absolute power,” he said. “I believe the world was meant to

be ruled by stern-minded Aryans. All inferior races must be suppressed or destroyed, all liberal and sentimental creeds wiped out. I am working, as was Hitler before me, for a clean, well-ordered world."

"Hitler was insane," said Crandell in his weary voice. "Like any madman, like Napoleon and the rest, he came to the end that inevitably awaits all fanatics."

"Hitler was betrayed from within," said the Red Skull. "Such a fate can't befall me, Dr. Crandell. When I so much as sense the possibility, I eliminate that person. There is not a man on this island who is not one hundred percent behind me."

Crandell gazed out at the afternoon Pacific with listless eyes. "And where exactly is this island? You kept me drugged during our journey here."

"Let us simply say my island is somewhere in the South Pacific," replied the Skull. "A mere speck on the charts. No one suspects what lies here, doctor, or what will soon happen to the world."

"Haven't you done enough? You've destroyed cities, slaughtered thousands, made your filthy profits."

"Surely you don't still think we adopted your sonic weapons to our uses merely for the money we could collect? For the fools who were so eager to destroy their enemies?" Rising out of his wicker chair, the Red Skull strode to the railing and rested his gloved hands on it. "What those petty dictators and pathetic tyrants did, dear doctor, was help finance the field tests of your weapons. My motives have nothing to do with monetary profit."

"But you told me—"

"I told you whatever it was necessary to tell you in order to achieve the results I wanted," the Skull said patiently. "Now, I require your further cooperation. The major part of our campaign is about to begin."

“I don’t want to do any—”

“Beside the point. I *need* you. You must work out the plans for installing your sonic weapons in an orbiting satellite—”

“A satellite? You *are* insane. How do you expect you can launch a satellite without drawing the attention of—”

“Please, doctor.” A dry chuckling passed through the grinning crimson mouth. “Our satellite is already in orbit—one of the communications satellites developed by the Texon company. We have only to install the necessary weaponry.”

“Only install, eh? And how in blazes do you think you’re going to get—?”

“A shuttle is scheduled to make a rendezvous with this particular satellite in just five weeks, Dr. Crandell,” the Skull informed him. He turned to stare at the frail scientist. “We have arranged to have that shuttle craft at our disposal. You have only five weeks, Herr doctor, to work out all the necessary details.”

“No,” said Crandell. “I see what you’re up to now, Skull, and—”

“I intend to establish the Fourth Reich.” Deep in the sockets of the crimson mask his eyes glowed. “Envision this if you will, dear doctor. One fine morning, a little over five weeks hence, the proud city of London will be struck with a massive quake. In minutes it will be reduced to no more than a pile of ruin. Yes, in just a few minutes we will have accomplished what all Hitler’s missiles failed to do in World War Two. Then, before the stunned world can even understand what has happened, Paris will suffer a similar fate. The Eiffel Tower will fall, the whole city will turn to dust.” He laughed a long grating laugh. “Perhaps I shall also smash New York City. Yes, that would be most impressive and highly satisfying. To destroy that decadent place, all the sweaty millions of inferior humans who dwell there in filth.

All the killers and thieves and radicals. To crush them all beneath brick and stone and concrete, to send their steel and glass towers slamming down on them . . . ah, that would be fine.” His gloved hands sounded like sandpaper as he rubbed them together joyfully. “I have a dream, doctor, a dream of Armageddon. And you are going to help me fulfill that dream.”

With effort, Dr. Crandell stood up to face the scarlet scourge. “I shall do nothing more for you. Nothing!”

Very casually, the Red Skull reached out and slapped the scientist across the face. “So you think now.”

Crandell staggered back, bumped into his chair, and fell to the planking of the shadowy porch. He lay there, sobbing quietly.

The Red Skull looked down at him and laughed.

Twenty-Six

The Texas night was warm, the sky was overcast. Thick shadows surrounded the high stone wall where Captain America stood.

He glanced up some ten feet above him to the top of the wall. There was no evidence of an alarm system. Attaching his shield to his arm and taking a deep breath, he scaled the thick stone barrier.

He moved with amazing speed and agility. Pausing on the top, he rolled over and dropped to the ground among the high, thick shrubbery.

The walled-in Klise estate covered three acres. The main house stood on a slight hill some way off. It was a vast conglomeration of white concrete and glass, and its lights were glowing through the many trees that filled the grounds.

Cap suddenly became aware of a thumping sound. A moment later he saw a black German shepherd galloping across the night lawn toward the spot where he stood.

The animal was making an angry growling sound. It didn’t hesitate at all; its charging run changed to a leap and it came hurtling toward Cap’s throat, its jaws slavering.

But the sharp fangs never got to do their job. Instead, the creature’s skull connected with the hard surface of the red, white, and blue shield.

Giving one surprised whimper, the watchdog fell into the bushes. Out cold.

Staying in the shadows beneath the trees, Captain America started off toward Klise’s mansion. He’d already checked on the businessman’s whereabouts, and he knew Klise was at home tonight.

The first guard was relatively quiet. Gun in hand, he was padding cautiously down across the night lawn, his eyes ticking from side to side.

He noticed nothing unusual until all at once a large round metal disc was sizzling right at him from out of the darkness.

“Awk!” was all he managed to say as he was struck in the throat by the edge of the shield.

Then Captain America was upon him. Three well-delivered punches and the guard was unconscious. He never felt the powerful arms that were dragging him across the grass to dump him into the underbrush. His belt served to truss his wrists together behind his back, and his handkerchief made an effective gag.

Captain America nearly reached the house before he encountered the next guard.

This fellow, a large crew-cut blond, tried to be a bit more clever. Aware that something must have happened to the watchdog and his colleague, he was determined to take the intruder by surprise.

As Cap passed beneath the sturdy oaks near the lighted study, the guard dropped down on him from above. That is,

he was trying to drop down on him.

But Captain America had sensed his presence a good ten seconds before he fell. Somersaulting forward with ease. Cap once again was not where he was supposed to be.

The guard smacked into the ground, hard. He lost his balance, teetered backward as pains shot up through his legs, tumbled to one knee and then went tipping flat out on his broad face.

“Going to get grass stains all over your clothes that way,” said Cap quietly. With the flat edge of his hand he dealt the stupefied guard several chops to the neck.

Sufficient to send the man into unconsciousness.

Cap was dragging the guy into some nearby shrubbery when a half dozen floodlights blazed on. The harsh beams of three of them caught him the way a spotlight catches a performer.

“Come on in,” invited a drawling voice in the darkness. “My gun and I are right anxious to chat with you.”

Meanwhile, in Barcelona, Nick Fury was not having a good time at all.

The fighting had been fun for a while, though he didn’t especially enjoy all the Spanish insults. The guy who had really annoyed him was this one, now stretched out cold in the shadowy alley. He’d called Fury *gordo.* And Nick wasn’t even any heavier now than he had been when he was a young man. Well, maybe a few pounds. Guy called him old, too. That really rankled.

Unlike his buddy Captain America, he hadn’t had the advantage of spending years in a state of suspended animation. He was pushing middle age, okay. No need to rub it in.

“Ya jerk!” he admonished, picking up another of his attackers and using him to bowl over a couple of new ones.

This was getting boring.

He'd already decked about six of these palookas. Now another half dozen or so were swarming all over him. Using fists, saps, clubs.

Every time Fury polished off a couple of the goons, two more popped up. It was like that guy Hercules when he had his bout with that watchamacallit that kept growing new heads.

Ducking a wildly swung hunk of two-by-four, Fury brought a fist up into the groin of one of his opponents.

The man howled, accusing Fury, in Spanish, of not fighting fair.

"Who fights fair in a brawl, ya yoyo?"

Maybe the fact all these bozos had jumped him when he'd come to nose around the Kesselring factory and warehouse was a good sign. Nobody'd go to all this trouble to guard a joint unless there was something important inside it.

"C'mon, stay down, will ya please!" He was almost certain he'd decked this same guy once already.

Cap ought to get a gander at him now. He could have come in here with a whole SHIELD crew, instead of trying the solo bit. But Fury'd figured it was best to be subtle about this caper. Take a quiet look, find out what Kesselring knew and what the jerk had to do with the Skull.

"Huh?"

He stopped still in the Barcelona alley, blinking his lone eye. Fury's mind had been wandering, and he hadn't realized that he had finally succeeded in knocking out the whole set of heavies.

Using his cigar as a pointer, Fury counted off the sprawled bodies. "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve-thirteen. A butcher's dozen." He put the stogie, which had gone out somewhere during the fracas, back in his mouth.

“Better tuck these babies away somewheres an’ then have myself a look-see,” he decided. “Got a real strong hunch I’m gonna get some juicy info inside this Kesselring joint.”

Twenty-Seven

“Now real careful, suh, you set that mean-looking shield way over across the room there,” ordered the soft-spoken, sun-tanned Klise, his .38 revolver pointing directly at Captain America. “You really played havoc with my staff.”

Slowly Cap walked over to lean his shield against one of the bookcases that lined three walls of the electronics tycoon’s office. “Like to do the same with you.”

“Imagine you would, suh, but you are not going to get the chance,” said Klise in his drawling voice. “Just, please, set yourself in that big old chair facing me. We all are going to have us a little talk before I take care of you, Captain America.”

“You know who I am.”

“I’d be mighty dense if I couldn’t figure that out, suh. Aren’t too many fellows go around wrapped up in Old Glory.”

“Are you really in on this thing with the Red Skull?”

The tanned man frowned. “There’s really no reason why you should cooperate with me,” he said, settling in behind his heavy wooden desk. “Still and all, I’d be obliged if you’d tell me how you linked me to the Red Skull.”

“One of the Skull’s toadies talked when he shouldn’t have,” answered Cap.

“Disappointing.” Klise kept his gun leveled at Captain America. “I had thought that his organization functioned better than that.”

“You’re in for a lot more disappointments if you stick with him.”

Klise laughed. “I seriously doubt that, suh.”

“What has the Red Skull promised you?”

“Really none of your damn business, my friend.”

“I imagine you expect to have a position of considerable power in this Fourth Reich of his.”

“That might well be. But it’s none of—”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the minor quake the Skull created up in Vermont yesterday,” said Cap. “He destroyed a chalet he was using as a headquarters base. The house *and* two dozen of his people along with it. All of them no doubt expecting a share of his cockeyed utopia.”

“Underlings.” Klise dismissed them with a wave of his free hand. “People of no importance. I’m in complete agreement with a man who destroys the insignificant when they are no longer of any use. I wish I was able to do the same, suh.”

Cap smiled evenly at him. “What you don’t realize, Klise, is that a man like the Red Skull doesn’t assign any significance to you either. Once you’ve served him, helped him gain access to a satellite, he’ll have no further use for you.”

“Cheap propaganda,” said Klise. He started to rise up out of his chair. “I’ll now take you to another part of my house,

suh, some rooms that are a bit more soundproof than these. Then we can—”

Captain America’s move was completely unexpected and incredibly swift. His crimson-booted feet all at once snapped out, striking the desk with tremendous force. The heavy object went shooting across the floor.

It took Klise hard in the midsection, shoving most of the wind out of him.

His finger just managed to squeeze the trigger, sending a slug into the polished desk top, as he gasped, howled, and doubled over. His chin hit the edge of the desk with a crack.

Cap leaped up and knocked the revolver out of his fingers. Then he caught him by the neck, lifted him clean off the floor, and threw him against the wall.

Klise hit it with his arms flapping. The wall shook, sending the books cascading down. They pummelled him and bounced off onto the thick carpet.

Captain America caught the gasping Klise on the rebound. One powerful hand gripped his shirt front and the other closed around his rapidly swallowing throat. “I don’t like you, Klise,” Cap told him. “I’ve served my country a good long time and I believe in it. People like you are like cancers, eating away at democracy. Right now, let me assure you, I’d like nothing better than to break you in pieces.” He brought his angry face closer to Klise’s, which was now very pale. “But I want to know some things, Klise, and you’re going to tell me exactly what I want to know. You’re going to tell me what the Red Skull’s planning. You’re going to tell me where he took Dr. Crandell. You’re going to tell me where the Skull himself is. Because if you don’t . . . I promise you, you’ll regret it, for however long you manage to live thereafter. Do you understand me?”

It took Klise over a half a minute to stop the chattering of his teeth. When he was finally able to speak, he blurted out,

“I’ll tell you everything.”

Twenty-Eight

It was midnight. Nick Fury lit a fresh cigar.

Puffing out a contented plume of smoke, he contemplated the computer terminal he'd discovered in the Kesselring offices.

"This 'puter oughta know what Kesselring's sendin' out and where it's goin'," he told himself.

From a flap pocket in his jumpsuit the SHIELD chief extracted a small electronic device that had been designed in the organization labs. Stepping up to the computer terminal, he casually slapped the gadget onto its side.

Fury seated himself at the terminal, flexed his stubby fingers, then punched out a communication with the computer. "I got a parasite gizmo stuck to ya. Git me? Means ya gotta do what I want ya to."

A message flashed on the display screen. *"Okay, boss."*

"Okay, so let's get crackin'. Is Kesselring doin' business with the Red Skull?"

"Correct assumption."

"Gimme some details."

“Supplying components to R.S”

“Fer sonic weapons?”

“Exactly.”

“Where’s he sendin’ the stuff?”

“Skull’s island.”

“Sounds like a spot I wanna visit. Where is it?”

The computer supplied Fury with the exact South Pacific location.

“Sounds like one of them tropical paradises.”

After gathering a few more pieces of information, Fury removed the gadget and dropped it away in his jumpsuit pocket.

“Nice talkin’ with ya,” he told the computer as he moved toward the exit. “Got a lot out of it.”

“Information I’m afraid you won’t be able to utilize.” A hairless man with a monocle was standing just on the other side of the threshold. He held an odd-shaped gun in one hand.

“You the night watchman?”

“No.”

“I thought ya looked too fancy fer that.”

The hairless man clicked his heels. “I am Baron Graff,” he explained. “In the service of the Red Skull. Your intruding here was an unfortunate mistake, Mr. Fury.”

“Lemme ask ya somethin’, baldy.” Fury eased nearer to the baron. “Do ya shave yer coco or did all yer hair fall out one day?”

Baron Graff smiled an unamused smile. “If you’ll be so kind as to accompany me now, please.”

“Ya outa yer mind? What I’m gonna do is shove that silly little gat down yer—”

“This is no ordinary gun, Mr. Fury.” The baron pulled the trigger.

Fury heard nothing; he saw nothing. But he felt the force of the hand-sized sonic gun. Waves of an ultrahigh frequency roared silently over him and shook him like a leaf in a storm. He began to tremble uncontrollably, he screamed in pain.

The pain built and built until his whole body was filled with it. Fury tried to hold on to consciousness, but he was being torn apart. He wanted to get back at the hairless man, he wanted to rip the sonic gun from his hand.

Instead he fell to the floor.

Another hot morning in Texas.

Amanda Twain finished eating the powdered sugar donut, wiped her fingers sedately on a paper napkin, and wadded it up in the rented car's ashtray. "When I talked to Mixx this morning, he said he was satisfied with our story on the quake that hit Mottsville. He especially enjoyed the veiled hints about a vast conspiracy, the clear implication that *Newsmag* was on top of the story and would soon reveal all."

Jake Sherdian guided the car along the wealthy street. "We make a great team, Mandy," Jake observed. "We're like Rodgers and Hart, Laurel and Hardy, Simon and Kirby."

"It wasn't a bad story."

"Not bad? We gave Mixx three pages of absolute dynamite."

Tapping her fingers on an air-conditioner outlet, the red-haired girl said, "We could quit while we're ahead."

"Meaning what? Stop being a team?"

"Meaning the veiled hints stay veiled," she said. "We forget about this earthquake-making yarn. We go home to quiet, smoggy, completely bonkers Los Angeles."

"Mixx wouldn't like that. And my journalist's soul wouldn't like it either."

“Well, we’re probably off on a wild-goose chase anyway.”

“Proverbial wild-goose chase,” he corrected. “Only we’re not.”

“Slim clue.”

“It isn’t,” Jake insisted, glancing at the enormous homes all around them. “The business card we dug out of the remains of the chalet points right here to Texon and Klise.”

“I still can’t believe Klise is goofy enough to go along with —”

“The guy is plenty goofy, Mandy. I read one of his books, little epic entitled *Solution to the Racial Question.* I have to tell you he worked out one whale of a solution, something that’d warm the heart of Adolf Hitler. No, take my word—”

“There it is.” Amanda pointed.

“Impressive, nice intimidating wall around it,” Jake said as he slowed the car.

“You’re really going to use the direct approach on him?”

“Sure, tell him we’re with *Newsmag* and ask him point-blank about his connections with the Red Skull,” said Jake. “It ought to stir up the waters.”

“More like stirring up a hornet’s nest.”

The iron gates hung open. Jake turned into the grounds of the Klise estate. “I’m getting a funny feeling,” he said.

“Three jelly donuts and a Seven-Up for breakfast will do that.”

“A spooky hunch,” he amplified. “Something’s wrong here, Mandy.”

There was no sign of life. No one to halt their progress right up to the front doors of the concrete and glass mansion.

Killing the engine, Jake scooted out of the car. He stood on the white gravel of the broad drive, hands on hips, scanning

the front of the mansion. “Notice the front doors? Half open.”

The girl joined him. “Yes, that is sort of odd.”

“Plus there’s nobody around.”

“Wait.” There was a rustling in one of the nearby hedges. “Something’s moving over there.”

It was a depressed-looking German shepherd. The creature hobbled out of the brush and eyed them, its head downcast.

“We’re basically friendly,” Jake told him.

At the sound of Jake’s voice the dog gave a yelp, turned around, and ran scrambling away, its tail between its legs.

“Every now and then I affect somebody like that,” Jake said. He climbed up to the front doors and knocked.

It brought no response.

He pushed the bell button, setting off chimes deep inside the house.

Still no response.

“Shall we look inside?” suggested Amanda.

In answer, Jake pushed the doors open wide. “Hello? Anybody at home?”

Silence.

Taking hold of Amanda’s arm, Jake crossed the threshold. He sniffed. “Somebody’s been firing a gun in here,” he announced. “Over this way.”

They crossed a hall and entered a large study. Many of the books had fallen off their shelves, the desk was pushed over into the wall, and a chair and lamp were overturned.

“Stay here.” Jake went over to look behind the desk. “No bodies.”

“Plenty of signs of a struggle.”

“No bloodstains, though.” He poked at the desk top. “Here’s a bullet hole.”

“Certainly looks as though Klise was into something hazardous.”

“And so are you, my friends.”

In the doorway now stood two men—large, somber, dark-suited, side by side, each of them holding a Luger.

“You aren’t by any chance with the FBI?” asked Jake tentatively.

“We aren’t FBI agents, no,” said one of the large men.

“Probably not local cops either,” guessed Jake.

“No.” said the other man. “We represent the Red Skull.”

Twenty-Nine

Captain America returned to the barbershop.

He went through the identification routines, traded a few pleasantries with the pretty manicurist, and then entered the underground SHIELD headquarters.

At once, Cap sensed an uneasiness. The SHIELD agents weren't going about their tasks with the usual concentration, and when he entered, several of them started and glanced at him anxiously.

It was Caroline Crandell who broke the news. She came running across the wide floor toward him. "He's missing!" she said, putting her palms against his broad chain-mailed chest.

"Nick Fury?"

The girl's head bobbed up and down. "It's my fault. Everyone who tries to help me ends up—"

"Whoa now," Cap advised. "Feeling sorry for yourself isn't going to help. You're not a jinx."

“Maybe not, but—”

“Cap, we’ve been waiting for you,” said a young SHIELD agent who came hurrying up to them. “We have initiated several procedures, and SHIELD squads are at work. But so far we haven’t come up with a trace of Nick.”

“Suppose you tell me exactly what happened, Reisberson,” Cap requested.

Reisberson took a deep breath. “While you were checking out the Houston lead, Nick jetted over to Spain to look into the Kesselring connection. You knew that. Thing is, Cap, Nick insisted on doing a single. He left his backup team at the airfield, promising to call them in as soon as he’d done some preliminary nosing around.” The concerned young agent spread his hands wide. “He never contacted the team. So at oh-one-hundred hours they proceeded to the Barcelona factory. They found evidence, including a local thug with a fractured skull, that Nick had been there.”

“You questioned the hood?”

“Yes. He was hired by parties unknown to attack Nick if he should show up in the vicinity of the Kesselring complex. The thug and a dozen of his cronies were given pix of Nick and a hundred bucks each,” said Reisberson. “We’ll, obviously, check this out further. But right at the moment all we have is a lot of dead ends.”

“You found signs that Nick had been at the factory,” said Captain America, frowning. “Any indication he’d been shot or otherwise injured?”

The young SHIELD agent shook his head. “No, there was no blood, or any other evidence of a physical injury.”

“So Nick may have been taken out of there alive.”

“We think so, Cap. Although that may be wishful thinking.”

Caroline asked, “Did you find out anything in Texas?”

Nodding, Captain America said, “Klise decided to be very cooperative. I turned him over to some SHIELD field agents

in Houston. He was able to tell me where the Red Skull's central base for this earthquake operation is. A small island in the South Pacific."

"They may have taken Nick there," said Reisberson, brightening.

"I'll bank on that."

"We're prepared for a massive raid, using the helicarrier and—"

"I don't think we're quite ready for an all-out invasion," Cap said. "The island has to be scouted out first."

"But the longer we wait—"

"Here's what we'll do," said Captain America. And he outlined a plan.

A half hour after the helicarrier had taken off for the Pacific, there was a timid knock on the door of Captain America's cabin.

"Come in," he called.

Caroline entered, head down. "I . . . I wanted to talk to you."

"Okay."

"Firstly, I-I appreciate your letting me tag along. I promise you I won't get underfoot or—"

"You're going to stay right here in the helicarrier during the whole operation," he reminded her. "You'll be perfectly safe."

"I know." She touched a metal chair, then decided to sit. "Do you think my . . . my father is still alive?"

"Yes, he's alive, no doubt about it."

"What makes you so positive?"

"I mentioned earlier, Caroline, that Klise was quite talkative once I got him started. He's been expecting to play a big part in the Red Skull's projected Fourth Reich. They've

confided in him to a certain extent, giving him the illusion that he's a lot more important that I suspect he really is. Klise told me your father was taken to the Skull's island."

"Oh, then he isn't dead."

"The Skull still needs him."

"There's more he wants him to do, I know that. I'm not exactly sure of the nature of it—"

"What the Skull plans to do, and Klise was able to aid him considerably in setting this up, is mount sonic weapons in a satellite. Thereby giving himself the capacity to destroy the entire civilized world."

"Father will never go along with that." The girl pressed her fingers to her chest.

"It'll never happen, Caroline," said Captain America. "Working with SHIELD agents in Texas, I saw to it that the Skull will never be able to use a satellite. He, however, doesn't know that yet."

"But when he finds out . . . then he won't have any further use for my father. He'll—"

"We have a slight time margin working in our favor," Cap assured her. "Klise's departure from his home was made to look like he'd panicked. We've also left a false trail. Before the Skull realizes that Klise has told me the plans, we'll have him in our net."

"You sound very optimistic . . . can we afford to be?"

"Yes, Caroline. My experience tells me that a good cause, such as the one we're fighting for, always wins out," he said. "I also know nothing is easy. You have to *fight* for what you believe in. And the worst mistake you can make is underestimating your enemy."

"You're right," the girl said. "But you're aware of how dangerous it'll be. And still you're going in alone."

"I'm going to reconnoiter alone, yes. Once I've found out as much as I can about the layout of the island, I'm calling

in the full SHIELD strike force.”

“If we’re successful, then I’ll see my father again . . . soon.”

“You’ll see him again,” Captain America promised.

Thirty

Nick Fury shook his fist at the low metal ceiling of his cell. “Ya bums!” he shouted. “It’s bad enough ya frisked me an’ swiped every darn one of my concealed weapons an’ all my ready cash. But, fer cryin’ out loud, you went an’ took my cigars, too!”

Clenching his hands behind his back, Fury resumed pacing the small cell he’d awakened in a little over an hour ago. The room was eight feet wide and about ten feet high. There were no windows, and the only door did not possess a keyhole.

The more he paced, the better Fury felt. That sonic gun had really taken the starch out of him. Imagine being decked by a guy like that, some goofy Prussian type who was bald all over.

That damn gun. A portable version of the weapons they’d been using on the cities, obviously. Yeah, the dang thing started an earthquake in your innards. The first thing you knew your chin was kissing the floorboards.

“Geeze, what a lousy break,” Fury muttered, clenching his fists.

He’d found out all about their damn island, and there he was on the brink of setting up a raid. Then that cueball with the sound gun had to pop up.

Fury sniffed at the air in his cell. Maybe he was on the very island he’d been aiming to invade.

He tried a few more sniffs.

“Nerts, all I can smell is the air conditioner and the plumbing,” Fury decided. “Not a whiff of tropical air.”

On the positive side, he was still alive. So long as you were breathing, you still had a chance. Slim sometimes, but a chance. Once you were dead, all the odds were against you.

“And now the bad news,” said Fury.

He was aware that the Red Skull hated SHIELD and everything the top secret intelligence agency stood for. And having Nick Fury remain alive didn’t mean the Skull was mellowing in his old age. It meant he had some use for him.

A use that would almost certainly involve some sort of torture.

Well, a lot of these jerks had tried that. And Fury was still walking around upright while most of them were pushing up daisies.

“Even though I’m probably not as gung ho as Cap,” he said to himself, “I can still take whatever these babies dish out.”

The door of his cell slid open.

A voice from outside said, “Come with us, please.”

“Very admirable trait,” Jake said, tapping Amanda on the arm.

“What?” the girl sat up in the plane’s passenger seat, blinking awake.

“I was admiring another of your positive qualities,” said the reporter. “Being able to relax and nod off even when we’re being hauled lord knows where.”

She muffled a small yawn with her hand. “Well, while we’ve been flying over the broad Pacific, Jake, I’ve been thinking about how little sleep I’ve chalked up in the past few days. After contemplating that for a spell, I dozed off.”

“Have you noticed that we’re circling for a landing?”

Leaning across him, the red-haired girl glanced out the window. “Crikey, an island.”

“Lots of ’em in these parts.”

Amanda put her hand on his. “These lads who grabbed us honestly think we’re agents for the opposition.”

“Yeah, that’s the impression I got. They sure weren’t impressed with our *Newsmag* credentials,” he said. “And we wouldn’t have been treated to this fun-filled scenic flight if they thought we were simple reporters.”

She kept her hand on his. “The way I see it, we’re in a pretty rotten position.”

“Yep, we’re up the proverbial creek,” Jake agreed. “We’re being brought here to be questioned.”

“Trouble is we don’t know anything.”

“Nothing that’s going to interest a gang of international spies.”

There was a screech and a bounce as the small jet landed on the island’s camouflaged field.

“When they find out we don’t know anything,” Amanda said, “they won’t be very happy. They’ll probably kill us, Jake.”

Jake tried a smile. “I’m a great believer in last-minute rescues,” he told her. “I may even try to bring one off

myself.”

Thirty-One

Nick Fury jumped to his feet when the door opened.

Two people were shoved roughly into the room, then the door was slammed after them. A tan curly-haired young guy and a red-haired girl who was terrific-looking, if maybe a shade on the slim side.

They were both frightened and disoriented, the redhead especially.

The guy said, “You’re Nick Fury. I interviewed you once. I’m Jake Sheridan, with *Newsmag.”*

Fury snapped his stubby fingers. “Oh, yeah, you’re the so-and-so who described me as an ‘aging do-gooder,’ an’ a ‘cloak-and-dagger type who does most of his thinking with his massive fists.’ Actually I got the mitts of an artist,” he said, holding them up. “What the hell are you doing here? Don’t tell me old skeleton puss is letting me give interviews to the press?”

“We seem to have stumbled into something big,” said the girl.

“This is Amanda Twain,” Jake said. “We were following up some leads on this man-made quake business and—”

“Yeah, that’s right. Some of my gang spotted you pokin’ around up in Mottsville.”

“It was while we were poking around in Houston,” Amanda explained, “that we crossed the path of some very unpleasant gentlemen.”

“Houston? That’s where . . . naw, I’d better dummy up about that,” Fury said. “The Skull is sure to have this joint thoroughly bugged.”

“That I do, Nick Fury,” said a taunting voice that came out of the metal ceiling. “You’re all putting on a very engaging performance. Pretending those two aren’t fellow SHIELD agents.”

Fury made a gesture at the ceiling. “Ya talk like a guy with toilet paper fer brains, Skull,” he bellowed. “If you ever read anything besides *Mein Kampf* and the funny papers, you’d recognize these kids’ names. They get by-lines in *Newsmag* every damn week.”

“Perhaps they do,” was the Skull’s answer. “That does not prevent them from being in your employ as well.”

“C’moff it,” advised Fury. “If ya wanna work me over, go ’head. Don’t mess with these kids, though.”

“We really are only reporters,” said Amanda.

“You’re a very attractive young woman,” said the voice of the Skull. “Very delicate.”

All at once the metal wall to their right shimmered. In a matter of seconds it had turned to thick glass and they could see the Red Skull enthroned in a large metallic chair. Beside him was Dr. Crandell, sitting forlornly in a wicker chair. Two blank-faced men with rifles stood behind him.

In his gloved right hand, the Skull held an object the size of a pocket calculator.

Amanda moved closer to Jake and took hold of his arm. “He’s horrible,” she whispered.

Putting a protective arm around her, Jake said, “At least there’s a sheet of glass between him and us.”

Fury went striding right up to the glass wall. Jabbing a finger in the Skull’s direction, he boomed out, “Ya better let Doc Crandell go, Skull!”

The Skull’s laughter came rattling and echoing out of the overhead speakers. “You’re in no position to dictate to me, Nick Fury,” he reminded. “Let me demonstrate, more clearly, what I mean.” He touched one of the buttons on the device he was holding.

A nozzle in the metal ceiling swirled down, pointing directly at Fury’s head. There was no sound, no flash of light.

But Fury howled with pain, bent over and clutched at his stomach.

Jake left the girl’s side, moving over to try to help Fury.

“Leave him alone,” warned the Red Skull, fingering another of the buttons.

A second nozzle appeared, seeking the running reporter. The ultrasonic wave smacked at him. His legs gave way and his arms were flung wide. Jake staggered, stumbled, fell. He stayed on his knees, head down, groaning.

Amanda went and knelt beside him. “Jake, Jake! What did they do to you?”

“It’s . . . it’s okay . . . Mandy.” He tried to get to his feet, found that he couldn’t.

Fury was up, though. He charged the glass wall, beat a fist against it. “Ya crimson creep! Leave these kids alone, I tell ya. They ain’t SHIELD agents.”

“I am highly curious,” the Skull’s amplified voice informed him. “There are many things you can tell me, Nick Fury. You can begin by telling me what has been done with Herr Klise.

I do not believe he simply decided to run away, particularly since these two agents of yours were found in his palatial Texas home."

"Aw, you can take a runnin' leap at a donut, buddy."

Another button.

Amanda screamed and clutched at her side. Her head jerked back convulsively, once, twice, again. The blood seemed to drain out of her face. She made gagging sounds, swaying.

"That was at the mildest setting," said the Red Skull.

"Don't ya pay any attention to what I been tellin' ya, jerko?" Fury stood glowering at him. "The girl is a magazine writer, pure and simple." He jabbed at his broad chest with a thumb. "I'm the guy ya want. Send these kids home."

"Where is Klise?"

"Ya got me," said Fury. "It wasn't my turn to watch him."

This jolt hit Amanda harder. She cried out once, then crumpled to the floor.

Jake bent over her. "What are we going to do?" he said in a dazed voice. "What are we going to do?"

"Where is Klise?" repeated the Skull's amplified voice.

"Just get these kids outa here, Skull."

"You will tell me everything I want to know, Nick Fury."

More sonic guns thrust out of the metal ceiling.

Jake was hit again, from two sides. He rose up, his body jerking. He spun around once before falling down across the unconscious girl.

"With an exposure of this strength," explained the metallic voice, "the subject usually revives in five to ten minutes. When your agents come to, Nick Fury, I will increase the strength of the ultrasonic waves they're being subjected to. I have several hours to devote to this interrogation."

"It won't get ya nothin', bonehead!"

“Listen to me, Nick Fury,” said the Red Skull. “You consider yourself a strong and brave man. You are imbued with the typical American’s foolish belief in himself. I promise you I can break you.”

“So give it a whirl.”

“What you’ve witnessed so far, what has happened so far, Nick Fury, is only a mild sampling of what lies in store for you,” said the Skull slowly. “It can get much worse.”

And it did.

Thirty-Two

Swiftly, silently, Captain America swam through the black water. Fifteen minutes ago he had left the SHIELD helicarrier hovering a mile off the shore of the Red Skull’s island base. Already he could make out the shape of the island looming ahead of him.

There was a lone guard, clad in dark coveralls, patrolling the back beach.

So quietly did Cap emerge from the black water that the man never knew what had suddenly sent him dropping into unconsciousness.

The star-spangled crusader borrowed the guard’s coveralls, then trussed the man up and hid him in the thick foliage above the beach.

He moved through the dark jungle as though he’d lived in the Pacific all his life. Not a twig cracked, not a branch rattled, no sleeping creature was awakened.

“Lights ahead,” he said to himself after a while.

The jungle thinned, the trees became smaller. Finally there was nothing but sand. At night the camouflaged buildings looked like low shaggy hills.

“Given the Red Skull’s outlook on life,” mused Captain America, “I’d say the biggest building has to be his central headquarters. He likes to do things on a grand scale.”

There were two guards at the main entrance to the largest of the squat, sturdy buildings. They were standing at attention, their rifles held in front of them.

Cap adjusted the khaki cap he’d borrowed from the beach guard. Then he went running right up to the guards. “I found this,” he said in flawless German. “In the jungle.”

“What?”

“Is that you, Ulrich?”

“Look at this, look. Do you realize what it means?” Halting before the two men, he dropped the cigarette lighter he’d found in the coveralls’ pocket. “It means real trouble.”

Instinctively both guards bent down to examine the object.

“Ulrich, that looks like it’s merely a—”

Bonk!

With tremendous force Captain America slammed their heads together like two coconuts.

One of the guards immediately passed over into a state of temporary oblivion. His partner was still awake, though he was wobbly and dazed. Cap gave him a deft blow to the chin, and he joined his friend on the ground.

Captain America didn’t see any other guards coming to investigate the little rumpus. It took him less than three minutes to tie up and gag both the guards. He deposited them in a thick stripe of darkness alongside the building and then boldly entered it.

A long metal-walled corridor confronted him. And at its end, a burly man stood with a pistol in his hand.

“Wo gehen sie?” inquired the man, starting to trot toward Cap.

He pointed at the night outside. “It’s Ulrich,” he answered in German. “I fear something dreadful has happened to him.”

“Ulrich? But he’s supposed to be at the beach post on the other side of the island.”

Captain America made a shrugging, don’t-ask-me gesture. “I think what happened, sir,” he said to the approaching man, “was this.”

“Was what?”

“This!” Cap brought up an impressive haymaker.

“Uff!” said the man as he hit the floor.

Cap caught his pistol on the way down, deposited it in a pocket and moved deeper into the building.

It was on the first level below ground, after he’d taken care of two more guards, that he encountered Nick Fury.

The SHIELD chief, out cold, was being carried along a corridor by two more guards. One held his feet, the other his shoulders.

“Quickly,” Cap called to them. “You’re making a serious mistake.”

They halted, letting Fury sag. “What?” asked the guard at Nick’s feet.

Captain America jogged up to the man. “A mistake, you’re making a mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“Stopping to talk to me,” Cap explained as he punched the man in the stomach.

“Oof!” The guard let go of Fury’s feet. He was bringing up his fists when Captain America hit him again.

While that guard was assuming an unconscious position on the corridor floor, Cap charged the other man.

This guard had abandoned Fury and was reaching for the gun at his belt.

But his thick fingers never made it to the holster. A chopping blow paralyzed his arm, three jabs in the midsection folded him over, and a driving punch to the chin finished him off.

“Can’t a guy snooze in peace around this dump?” Fury was sitting up, rubbing his fingers through his grizzled hair. “Jeez, I feel like I just retired after fifty years as a roller coaster inspector.”

Putting a hand under his elbow, Cap helped Fury over to a chair. “Fill me in,” he requested.

Fury did some deep breathing, then said, “The Skull’s been demonstrating some of his sonic toys on us.”

“Us?”

“Aw, the jerk’s grabbed a couple of kids who work for *Newsmag,* thinks they’re on my payroll.”

“What about Dr. Crandell?”

“The doc’s here, too.” Still slightly glazed, Fury looked around him. “Cells are on this floor, Cap, and the place where he used the guns on us is down one level. Must be the kids are still there. Me he must be saving for another session later. Doc C. is in a glass room watching the show. Sort of like a sponsor’s booth, ya know.”

“I’ll take a look.”

“We’ll take a look, old buddy.”

Cap shook his head. “You’re too wobbly,” he told the SHIELD leader.

“Like hell I—”

“Listen now, Nick, the helicarrier is standing by a mile off shore and—”

“Off the shore of what? Ya mean we *are* on the damn island?”

“You are on a body of land surrounded by water, the Skull’s own private island,” he replied. “There’s a full raiding party aboard the helicarrier. Soon as I make sure Dr. Crandell and the two reporters are safe, you can order the full attack.” He slipped a small comm-box out of his belt and into his friend’s hand.

“Pansy stuff,” complained Fury. “Any simp can flick a switch and blab into a talkie box. I wanna help you—”

“We don’t have much time, Nick. Tell me what the reporters look like.”

“Guy’s middle-sized, curly dark hair, middle thirties. Girl is a nifty redhead. But lemme show ya the—”

“No. Get up to the ground level,” said Captain America. “Give me fifteen minutes before you start the fireworks.”

“Fifteen? I’ll give ya *ten.* Plenty of time for a cinchy job like what ya got ahead of ya.” He gave the star-spangled crusader a comradely punch on the arm before starting, a little unsteadily, away.

Thirty-Three

They were everywhere.

Slugging, pummelling, kicking.

Captain America wasn’t certain how many there were. He’d lost track when the fifteenth husky Skull trooper had joined in the battle against him.

They had materialized unexpectedly when he was a mere hundred yards away from his destination. The doors just started popping open, like a gigantic automat gone berserk.

The troopers were silent and methodical. They tackled him, fouled him, booted him—all in grim silence. Only grunts and labored breathing could be heard, along with the thud of fist against flesh.

The first few were no problem. Some well-directed punches, some agile somersaulting, and Captain America had quickly crossed five of the dedicated manglers off the list.

Five more came at him, then another five, smashing over him like a human tidal wave.

Captain America battled tremendously, scattering the guards the way a sickle scatters grass.

But finally, inevitably, he began to lose. There were simply too many of them.

Cap dodged, pivoted, punched, yet he could feel himself slowing as more and more of the opposition were getting through.

A moment more and Captain America was down. They fell upon him, silent triumph showing on their brutal faces.

". . . long have I anticipated this," a hollow, echoing voice was saying. "I intend to savor it, to extend it over several pleasurable hours."

Captain America pushed himself up and glanced around. This was the room Nick Fury had told him about.

Lying unconscious on the floor in a crumpled rag-doll position was a red-haired girl. A dark man was crouched beside her, hugging the pain which filled him.

Behind the glass wall sat the Red Skull, his crimson mask looking exceptionally distorted. There also was the gaunt figure of Dr. Crandell—he seemed to be ill and frightened. And behind him were the pair of guards with rifles.

"Looks like you've already been enjoying yourself," said Captain America.

"Merely a prelude," chuckled the Skull. "Although I must admit Nick Fury provided me with considerable diversion. He is an incredibly stubborn man. At last, I grew tired of his continual refusal to talk."

"You won't get anything out of me either," promised Captain America.

"I am aware that you are even more zealous about defending your insipid country than the brutish Nick Fury," continued the Skull. "It will be interesting to see how much you can stand before you break, America."

“I don’t . . . think . . . Mandy can take . . . any more,” said Jake, the pain still gripping his body. “She’s not dead . . . but . . . we don’t know anything . . . I swear . . . You do . . . tell him! He’ll let us go . . . he promised . . . tell him. Please, Captain America.”

“Once we tell him what we know, he’ll kill us,” said Cap. “There isn’t any kind of exchange that can be arranged.”

“But, Mandy . . . I don’t want him to . . . hurt her anymore.”

Captain America stood up, facing the Red Skull. “Why not settle this another way, Skull,” he challenged. “Meet me on this side of the glass, in hand-to-hand combat.”

“Must I once again decline, America?” said the amplified voice. “You simply have to accept the fact I have no intention of giving you a fair chance. Now, let us proceed with the questioning. Where is Klise?”

“In Texas, as usual.”

Impatiently, the Skull said, “He disappeared from his home, along with three of my men. Either you or Nick Fury had a direct hand in it.”

Captain America grinned at the man behind the glass. “I can tell you this,” he said. “You’ll never place those sonic guns in any satellite.”

The Skull made a snarling noise. He half rose, a gloved finger jabbing a button.

Waves of silent sound hit Captain America. Everything began to roar, and a giant pain overtook his body. Then it faded and he found himself leaning against the far wall.

The people behind the glass were a blur.

One of the blurs was moving.

It was Crandell. He shoved his chair back violently, knocking over both of the men with the rifles. His thin hand shot out, got hold of the control box, and punched out a series of numbers.

The ceiling guns swung toward the vast wall of glass.

The glass screamed and shattered. Millions of glistening fragments rained down.

Suddenly there was no more barrier between Captain America and the Red Skull. Cap went running across the room, his crimson boots grinding against the splashes of glass.

“Stop him!” the Skull yelled.

But the guards couldn’t gather up their rifles in time. Cap went sailing through the air in a nimble leap.

He slammed into the Red Skull like a human cannonball.

“Now will you accept my challenge?” asked Cap as he hit him hard in the ribs.

“I’ll kill you, America!” The Skull kicked him viciously in the kneecap.

Captain America dealt a blow to the rubbery crimson mask.

Then there was a hubbub behind him. It sounded as though a heavy door was being torn off its hinges.

“Yer ten minutes are up!” announced the gruff voice of Nick Fury. “SHIELD has landed and has the whole flappin’ situation well in hand.”

Cap was only distracted for a fraction of a second, but it gave the Red Skull time to snatch up his heavy chair and use it. He managed to shove Cap off balance.

Then he dived toward the back wall and slapped at it. A section whizzed open and he jumped through it into a corridor beyond.

Captain America followed in a flash.

The wall closed behind them and he chased the retreating Skull down a long, dim corridor.

Thirty-Four

One of the troopers was trying to get into the helicopter.

The Red Skull shot him, kicked the body away, and shut the door of the bubble.

Captain America saw all of it as he came pounding out across the landing pad.

The rotor blades of the chopper had already come chuffing to life, and dust was swirling through the night.

About a quarter mile across the island guns were chattering. Men shouted, and orange and blue explosions blossomed in the tropical blackness.

The invasion of the Skull’s island was in full swing.

Meanwhile, the Red Skull’s copter was rising, climbing away into the air.

Captain America increased his pace, his mighty legs pumping furiously. Then he jumped straight up into the air. His hand caught the landing gear of the copter, making the ship lurch and sway.

It kept rising, arcing to the left as it gained altitude.

Cap held on, both hands firmly in place.

He and the circling helicopter were now about a hundred feet above the ground.

The Skull took the ship higher and higher, moving out over the black ocean.

Suddenly a panel in the copter's belly slid open, giving Cap a glimpse, in the greenish cabin light, of two odd-looking guns swiveling into position.

He had to dodge and shift on his perch to avoid the thrust of the unusual barrels.

The Skull must be planning to get out to the SHIELD helicarrier and use the sonic guns on it.

"Better put a stop to that little scheme."

Like the expert gymnast he was, he swung, booted feet foremost, up into the copter's cabin.

The plane gave a jump then righted itself.

"It's all over," Captain America told the Red Skull.

"America!" The Skull set the ship on an automatic course, then spun out of his seat. He held a .45 automatic in his gloved fist. "I had meant to kill you with the others below, but I can do it just as well right here and now."

The automatic barked.

But the slug didn't connect, because Cap was elsewhere. He had hurtled himself, ducking low, across the cabin.

The Skull was able to try one more shot before the star-spangled crusader was on him. Then the powerful fingers closed on his wrist and he was forced to let go of the weapon.

As the gun clanged to the floor Cap threw a series of punches into the Skull's midsection.

Fighting back violently, the Red Skull scored with two slashing jabs to the jaw.

Cap was driven back, but he rallied once again. He pressed in, his fists pumping.

The Skull slammed back against the control panel, the crimson mask quivering.

The helicopter yawed, rose, dipped—its automatic pilot was no longer in control.

As the two men battled, the ship skittered across the night sky like a balloon expelling its air.

The Skull butted Cap in the stomach with his head, sending him dangerously close to the opening in the cabin floor.

Cap teetered on the edge.

The Skull ran at him, striving to ram him out into the sea.

Regaining his balance, Captain America dodged to the right.

Now the Skull himself nearly went out through the gap. But at the last minute he clutched at the cabin wall, pulling himself to safety.

The copter was rattling downwards now.

The controls! Cap realized. He spun around, reaching for them.

The Skull jumped him, got an arm around his neck and slammed an elbow into his face.

Cap staggered, then shot several short jabs into his opponent’s ribs.

Then the helicopter hit the surface of the ocean with a tremendous smack. For a moment the air pressure inside the cabin kept it clear, but then the ship tilted, and foam and black water began to gush up through the opening in the floor.

Captain America was thrown back against the pilot seat. He couldn’t see the Red Skull—or anything else for that

matter—and was sinking deeper and deeper into the night sea.

He struggled mightily against the pull of the ocean. Finally he got out of the opening and pushed himself into the sea.

Kicking hard, Captain America kept clear of the plummeting plane. Straining every powerful muscle, he swam for the surface.

Less than a minute later he reached his goal and felt the night air flowing into his tortured lungs.

Treading water, he looked around for some sign of his enemy.

Sixty seconds passed. Sixty more.

The Red Skull did not appear.

Inflating his massive chest, Captain America dived beneath the surface.

He went down and down through the blackness.

He couldn’t see anything in the chilly darkness. Not a trace of the copter—not a trace of the Red Skull.

“Can he be dead?” he asked himself once he was again at the surface. “After all these years of battling, is the Red Skull dead at last?”

Shaking his head, he began swimming swiftly toward land.

Thirty-Five

A certain calm had settled over the island.

The fighting was over. Prisoners were being herded into the SHIELD landing craft that were lined up along the shore.

“Hiya, Cap!” boomed Nick Fury. He was tramping along the sandy beach, dragging an unconscious hairless man by the collar. “This is the skin-headed so-and-so who fed me a dose of sonics over in Barcelona, Spain.” Letting the baron drop to the gritty sand, Fury walked toward Cap with his hand held out. “Any idea where in blazes the Red Skull is?”

Shaking his friend’s hand, Captain America replied, “It’s possible, Nick, that he’s at the bottom of the sea.”

“Huh?”

“When you made your flamboyant entrance, the Skull took off down a secret tunnel. I followed.”

“That much I knew.”

“Then he took off in a helicopter,” continued Cap. “I tagged along. He was apparently planning to use the sonic

weapons on your hovering helicarrier, then swing inland again and take care of the island.”

“Kill everybody here?”

“You ought to know his style by now. Life means nothing to him. if he could get rid of you and me, the sacrifice of his own staff and troopers wouldn’t bother him.”

“So how come he didn’t get to have his fun?”

“We were fighting up there, and the chopper went out of control and plunged into the sea,” answered Cap. “It sank. I got out, but the Skull didn’t.”

Fury thrust a fresh cigar between his teeth and lit it. Puffing smoke, he said, “I gotta see that guy’s body before I write him off. He’s got more lives than a litter of black cats.”

“Once we mop up here, we can send divers down.”

“Ya wanna make a bet?”

Cap said, “About the Skull?”

Fury nodded. “I betcha we don’t find any trace of the guy down there.”

Caroline couldn’t believe it. She hesitated in the doorway of the cabin for a second, staring down along the corridor.

The gaunt man came limping along, a faint smile touching his face. “Carrie,” he said, holding out a hand.

“Dad!” The girl ran to her father and put her arms around him.

“I never thought we’d see each other again,” said the scientist.

After a moment, Caroline looked up and saw Captain America standing behind them. Wiping at her eyes, she said, “Thank you, Captain America. You promised me I’d see my father again, but I don’t think I really believed you.”

“We were lucky, Caroline,” Cap told her. “Of course, when you have Nick Fury on your side you tend to be lucky. We

want the medics to have a look at your father now. We came by here to invite you to come along."

"Yes, fine." She took hold of her father's thin arm and began walking down the corridor with him. "I'm so glad everything worked out this way."

Shaking his head, Dr. Crandell said, "We're both alive, Carrie. That's very good. But a great many people died because of my invention. From now on I have to work to . . . well, in some way make up for the horrible things that were done with the sonic weapons."

"It wasn't your fault. The Red Skull—"

"Yes, I know. It would be very easy to say the fault was not mine," said her father. "Logically, even legally, I suppose that's so. Inside me, though, Carrie, I know I owe the world something. And whatever I do from now on, in the time I have left, I must try to repay the debt."

"You'll do brilliant things," the girl told him. "I know."

Walking quietly beside them, Captain America smiled.

Jake Sheridan looked at the girl on the bed. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully now. He sat in the metal chair watching her, his hands twisting together in his lap.

He and Amanda were alone in the small helicarrier cabin.

"They say you're going to be okay," Jake said aloud to the sleeping girl. "I sure as hell hope so, Mandy. Funny thing . . . it dawned on me a while ago. Well, I don't seem to dislike you anymore. Could be I never did. Some reporter, huh? Can't even see what's going on right in front of him, in his own life." He cleared his throat and shifted his position on the hard chair. "I don't know if I can ever say anything like this to you when you're conscious, Mandy, but I love you. Yeah, I love you. But I suppose you, when you're up and around again, will feel pretty much as you did when we left

L.A. That’s okay, except I wish . . . well, we’ll just have to see, Mandy, how things go.”

“Jake,” said the girl on the bed, her eyes still shut.

He leaned close. “Are you awake?”

“I have been for the last ten minutes,” she said, a smile touching her lips.

“Oh, so? Then you heard all that—”

“Heard it, and liked it.” She reached up to touch his cheek with her warm hand. Her eyes opened and she looked directly into his face. “We can work out the details later, but for now . . . well, I don’t loathe you anymore, Jake.”

“Hey, that’s terrific.” He took hold of her hand.

“There’s just one thing,” she said.

“Anything. What?”

“After we’re married . . . please don’t call me Mandy.”

Thirty-Six

Someone was actually having a haircut in the barbershop.

An immaculate young man sat in the chair talking soccer with the barber.

Captain America, clad in trench coat and hat, went through the usual ritual. Three minutes later he was in the office of Nick Fury.

He got out of the coat and hat, watching his friend.

Fury was behind the desk, his face hidden by a magazine. His cigar was sending angry smoke signals up from behind the periodical.

“Morning, Nick.”

“Did ya see this rag?”

“Current issue of *Newsmag,* isn’t it?” Cap settled into a chair facing the desk.

“You’re damn tootin’ it is.” Fury slapped the magazine down on the desk top. His face was scowling. Even his eye patch looked angry. “The nerve of them two. After all I did for ’em.”

Grinning, Cap said, “Something in the write-up annoy you?”

Fury’s finger speared a paragraph in the offending magazine article. “You . . . you they call ‘the ageless crusader for justice.’ I coulda been ageless, too, if I’da got froze in a goldang . . . well, never mind that. Now let’s read along a bit further. Blah, blah . . . ‘brilliant rescue operation . . .’ blah, blah . . . ‘saved world . . .’ blah, blah . . . ‘aging spy guy, Nick Fury, tough despite the rubber tire around his middle-aged middle . . .’ Can ya believe that? I rescue them two ingrates, save their cookies. Hell, they’re gonna get married, I hear. Yeah, Nick Fury plays cupid and they end up bitin’ the hand that feeds ’em. Aging spy guy am I? I’ll show ’em who’s agin’. I gotta mind to show up at their flappin’ weddin’ and throw rice. Hunnert-pound sacks of rice. Fat around the middle, am I? I can still go fifteen rounds with—”

“Nick,” said Cap, “the story, with the exception of their references to you, seemed pretty accurate to me. And Jake and Amanda were very good about keeping certain facts out of print. All in all, they did a good job.”

“Oh, so maybe I ought to run over an’ pin a flappin’ Pulitzer Prize on ’em?”

“My advice is,” said Cap in a calming tone, “to clip out the story and paste it in your scrapbook. Six months from now give it another read through and see how it hits you.”

“Six months?” boomed Fury. “I want to punch somebody out before then.” He grabbed the magazine, growled, and tore it in half. Then in quarters. “Paste it in my blinkin’ scrapbook. Why, I’ll stuff it, piece by piece—”

“I heard you bought ten copies,” said Cap. “So I suppose you can afford to rip one up.”

“It was only five, Cap. Mostly because the photo they used of me ain’t bad. I think maybe they had an artist touch up the gray at the temples. Sort of flattering.”

Captain America laughed and then asked, “Any more news?”

Fury shook his head, using the flat of his hands to arrange the scraps of the magazine into a pile. “Everything’s coming up negative,” he replied. “We sent another crew of SHIELD divers down. They found the chopper this time, Cap. Skull wasn’t in it. Doesn’t mean much. His body coulda slipped out. If you’re an optimist you can figure he’s inside a few sharks now. Me, I’m not closing the ledger on the Red Skull.”

“We’ll have to be very alert for a while, Nick. If he is alive, I want to stop his next scheme before he destroys a half dozen cities the way he did this time around.”

“Yeah, we’ll nip the so-and-so in the bud,” promised Fury. “If he does come back to life.” He sighed. “Be a nice world if there wasn’t any Red Skulls in it. Haw, that’ll be the day.”

Cap noticed something sitting on the edge of the desk. “Postcard?”

Fury chuckled. “These government red-tape guys tickle me. Yeah, it’s a postal from Caroline Crandell,” he said, handing it across to his friend. “I didn’t get it in the mail—it came in a diplomatic pouch.”

Captain America read the short message and set the card aside. “She sounds happy . . . or at least happier than she has been for quite a while.”

“Gonna take a long time for them to get over what they been through,” said Fury. “But I gota hunch they’ll make it.”

Cap nodded. “Yes, I—”

“Nick!” a young SHIELD agent came bursting into the office. “Can you come into communications? We’ve got something big coming in.”

Fury pushed back from his desk. “Sure, be right there,” he said. “Come along, Cap. This might be something that’ll interest you.”

The two men walked out of the office, side by side.